

Sermon for Palm Sunday C
Sunday, April 10, 2022
“The Grand Play of Holy Week”

Text: Luke 22:39 – 23:56; Philippians 2:5-11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every year I say pretty much the same thing on Palm Sunday, because Palm Sunday begins the most important week of the Christian year. Palm Sunday is like the first scene of the first act of a movie or play. Palm Sunday sets the stage for the events over the coming week, which are an important part of our journey of faith as Christians. The story is meant to be taken seriously.

The story of the Passion that we hear this year is Luke’s version. As a gospel writer, or evangelist, Luke’s Gospel is notable for giving lots of details: details of time, details of place, details about what people were thinking, saying, and their intentions. Luke’s passion story doesn’t disappoint. Luke gives us an intense account of the final days of Jesus’s life. Palm Sunday uses the passion narrative to take us on an emotional and spiritual roller coaster. The liturgy begins with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the kind of entry given to a king or an emperor, someone of high status with people throwing palm branches in his way and crying “Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” But by the end of the story, Jesus hangs dead on a cross, then buried in a tomb. It seems like all is lost.

Luke spends a great deal of time and writer’s ink reminding his audience that Jesus is the Messiah, Savior, and King—all very radical statements and considered dangerous, even treacherous by the established leaders around him. What’s interesting about Luke’s version that differs from the other Gospels is that in Luke’s version, Jesus is portrayed less as a victim but more as a victor. When interrogated by the Jewish council and Pilate as to whether he is a king or the Messiah, he does not admit it, but he does not deny it either. Rather, he says, “You say so,” but also insists that the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of God. Then from the cross, instead of lamenting as to why God has forsaken him, Luke’s Jesus forgives those who handed him over saying that they don’t know what they are doing, and he offers absolution to a criminal hanging with him, saying “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” And as his human life ended, he does not simply “breathe his last” or “give up his spirit,” but rather, he says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” We encounter a Jesus who is in control in the midst of his agony.

The Passion story frames the events of Holy Week and is like a movie trailer as we enter a new season. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of a different season. We’re still in a penitential season, but today begins Holy Week. The colors are different; they are red, or technically oxblood. Palm Sunday marks Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he was hailed as a king with cries of “Hosanna, to the Son of David.” But over the few days that followed, Jesus did some things that got him into trouble:

first, he ran the moneychangers out of the temple, totally disrupting a major source of income for many. Then he made statements about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days. The Jewish authorities, his own people, had it out for him and wanted him dead. Holy week ends with the events that happened next. The high point of this week is the Triduum, that is Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday—the Three Holy Days. The Triduum is the main event. Without it, the next chapter in the Christian story isn't as magnificent.

I talk about The Triduum in the singular, because it is *one* event. When the mass begins on Maundy Thursday with the opening acclamation, the liturgical event does not end until the dismissal at the First Mass of Easter on Saturday night following the Vigil. One event divided into three parts over three days. If you miss any part of the Triduum it's like watching the first 5 minutes of a movie, going away to do something else, and coming back to watch the last 5 minutes of the movie. The ending won't make sense if you don't stay for the middle and see how the story develops, how the characters develop, and to connect the dots between the beginning and the end. Holy Week is the same. If you experience today and then don't come back until Easter, you'll miss the connection between Palm Sunday and Easter, and you won't fully get why Easter is so wonderful. You can't enjoy the mountaintop that is Easter unless you journey through the valley that is Passion Week. In our liturgical life, the Triduum incorporates some of the oldest and most beautiful and most ancient liturgies of Christianity and links to the core statements of our doctrine and faith. The Triduum is a journey with Jesus Christ from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, into the Upper Room where he instituted the Holy Eucharist, to the Prætorium of Pontius Pilate, through the streets of Jerusalem with the cross on his back, all the way to Calvary, the place of the skull. You can join in all of the liturgies of the week either here in person or online, as the entire week will be live streamed.

Holy Week is not just something to be talked about or noted on a calendar or forgotten. The reason we live the Triduum is so that we can experience the intense outpouring of love that Jesus had for us, who, as St. Paul told us in his letter to the Philippians, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Holy Week is about love. The Triduum is a lesson in what divine love looks like.

God, who became man in the person of Jesus Christ, did not take his divinity lightly, but subjected himself to the most extreme aspects of his humanity, even to the point of horrific torture and death by public execution. God-incarnate experienced human suffering. We've suffered through a horrible pandemic and in the midst of that, we all had other trials, tribulations, and upheavals in our lives. Holy Week reminds us that God knows suffering, God knows pain, and God knows death. When we suffer,

he walks along with us, just as we walk with him when we walk the Stations of the Cross. He walks with us in the midst of our anxiety, suffering, despair, and grief to give us the strength to keep on keeping on. Jesus walks with us to make us push through it, because he knows first-hand that suffering is not the end, and death is not the end. There is hope and there is light at the end of the tunnel. On Saturday night, the final night of the Triduum, that light will be kindled in a new fire, and that new fire will spread to illuminate the world and remind us that God's ultimate act of love was Christ's resurrection, our relief, our hope, and our salvation. Suffering and death have no final say. All that we are going through will not last. We're already seeing better days. People are getting vaccinated, the cases of coronavirus and deaths are decreasing. Cities and countries are opening up. Easter is on the horizon. Amen.

Resource

Lucy Lind Hogan, Commentary on Luke 22:14—23:56 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/Sunday-of-the-passion-palm-sunday-3/commentary-on-luke-2214-2356-5>