

Palm Sunday
Rev. Laura Palmer
Year C
St. Martin-in-the-Field
April 2nd , 2023

Not so Fast

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

Minus the music, Palm Sunday cuts to the chase. For years, I quietly thrilled to the triumphal “Ride on Ride on in Majesty” until I began thinking more about the lyrics. There isn’t much majesty in the one I grew up singing and we’ll sing again today at the 10:30 service; “Ride on Ride on in Majesty, in lowly pomp ride on to Die.”

It’s gorgeous music with a grim message, a foretaste of a death to come. I have never found much majesty in death, not in the deaths I’ve seen at the hospital nor at the bedside of a friend who died five days ago.

Palm Sunday is a mash-up of triumph and looming death that always leaves me reeling. We are so ready to race right ahead to Easter-- Who isn’t ready for the resurrection? Palm Sunday reminds us: “Not so fast.” There’s a showdown in Jerusalem.

The jubilant crowds were waving palms and crying “Hosanna” which in Hebrew means “Save us.” The triumphal music we sing matches what crowds wanted in a savior. Someone who would save them, love them, and liberate them from the oppression, poverty and desperation that crushed their lives.

And here comes Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. The donkey affirms what Jesus always has: If you want a super hero savior, don’t look at me.

Pilate and his brutal forces with legions of soldiers, chariots, weapons, and armor traveled from the East into Jerusalem every Passover in a massive show of force to celebrate the Jews triumph over military might in Egypt.

Jesus rode in from the West on a donkey with his motley crew of disciples-- one of whom would soon betray him three times-- and a powerless rag tag crowd of followers. As for power? Only days before, Jesus had raised his beloved friend, Lazarus, from the dead. Word traveled fast. It was a threat to the emperor who

believed he had been sent from God. Lazarus, being raised from the dead surely helped seal Jesus' fate.

Writes author and noted theologian Frederick Buechner:

Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as they travel every road we take—despair at what, in our madness we, are bringing down on our own heads and hope in him who travels the road with us, and for us, and who is the only one of us all who is not mad.

This is the week we begin traveling the road of hope that ends in despair, torture, and death. This is the week that will end with Jesus demanding to know why God has abandoned him in agony from the cross.

This is the week that the crowd that cheered him on Palm Sunday jeered him five days later with the ugliest words in the New Testament: "Crucify him crucify Him!"

How did it happen? Jesus was crucified because of a Big Lie. Everyone knew he was innocent. Pilate knew, and Pilate's wife, disturbed by a dream, pleaded with him as we heard in the Passion narrative "to have nothing to do with this innocent man." The Pharisees knew and Judas knew. Pilate left it was up to the crowd.

Hate fueled an enraged and violent crowd. We saw evil and a big lie play out on January 6th in full horror. The crucifixion was based on a big lie and everyone knew it. Jesus knew it, too, and he did nothing to save himself because that would have meant betraying himself.

So why didn't God save his son? It's a question I've had to answer for myself to believe in God as a God of love. I don't believe God loved Jesus so much he let him die. The crucifixion had everything to do with hate and evil and nothing to do with love. I've never really understand exactly what it means that Christ died for my sins. Washed in the blood of the lamb? I'll pass. Violence redeems nothing, only love.

Helpful in thinking this through for me has been the French thinker, Rene Giraud, who suggests that knowing the capacity for violence in the human heart—think AR 15s—God send us the only alternative—the Prince of Peace, who came as a servant, not a king, who stood with the oppressed, the poor, and the Marginalized.

It doesn't sound like a threat to the empire, but it was, and still is. Martin Luther King,

Jr., knew he was not going to get to the Promised Land. Was it God's will that his son died? Or the will of those who knew he was innocent and executed him anyway?

Christianity is the only faith that worships a God who suffers with us. Late in his life, Elie Weisel was asked where God was in Auschwitz and he said in the smoke that came out of the crematoriums.

There are no shortcuts. Crucifixion will come to all of us in this life, one way or another. And we can never pretend, although we often forget to remember, that our savior doesn't know, or isn't right there with us in the absolute worst that this life can bring.

Death is not the end because after every Good Friday comes Easter. We will rejoice in that next Sunday as the triumph at the heart and power of our faith. But then we have 364 days to make Easter really matter. The choice is ours.

AMEN