

April 5, 2009
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday

“Are We Joyful or Not?”

Mark 15:1-47

Some of you may have noticed the way that today's service fell together is somewhat off-kilter. It's Palm Sunday. We know that because next Sunday is Easter. We know that because we started off the day with the reading from St. Luke about the joyful entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem and then all of us sang and joyfully entered the church with our palms branches. And the joyfulness continued as Hannah and Miley were welcomed into God's kingdom through Holy Baptism.

And then we got to today's rather long Gospel reading, and it sure doesn't seem to be very joyful does it? It starts out with Jesus being a bound prisoner of the Jewish leaders and things get worse from there. He is turned over to Pontius Pilate, questioned, tortured and beaten, mocked and ridiculed and crucified. He hangs painfully on the cross for several hours and finally, dies. His body is buried and our reading ends.

What happened? We started out with the joyful “Hosannas.” Why do we have this reading with the shouts of “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”? If we look at the back of our bulletins it says “Palm Sunday: Sunday of the Passion” and it almost makes you want to say, “Make up your mind! Which one is it?” At first glance, it's almost kind of annoying.

But when you think about it, it's not too hard to figure out why the brainy guys in the church who choose our three year cycle of Bible readings did this. It's simple. A lot of folks don't come to church for service on Good Friday. That's simply the way it is. The commandment was “Remember the Sabbath” and the Sabbath only came once a week, so they come to church once a week, on Sunday. So if we stuck with only the Palm Sunday reading, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the people came next week on Easter and heard of His triumphal resurrection, what would they miss?

They would miss the cross. And you know what? I think a lot of folks would be just fine with that.

People like the story of Jesus on Palm Sunday. The crowds are happy. Jesus is happy. It's a parade. Everybody except those nasty Pharisees and Jewish leaders are praising Jesus and seem to recognize Him as Messiah and king.

People love the story of Jesus on Easter. Jesus is risen from the dead. The disciples are overjoyed. The victory has been won and everybody can believe and be saved! It is truly the most wonderful of days!

A lot of folks would just like to focus on how great Jesus is. They focus on His miracles. They focus on His teachings, at least the ones they like. They focus on His Godhood, His sovereignty, His power over death. They want to sing His praises and bask in His glory. They are more than happy to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, because they don't really want to have to see Him on that cross.

Jesus on the cross is shocking, bloodied, bruised, and battered. Isaiah writes of God's servant that *“his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.”* It is a horrible and disturbing image. And it is even more disturbing because it forces us to ask the question, “Why? Why did it have to be this way?” And that question is scarcely out of our head when the answer comes to us in Paul's words, *“For our*

sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

It is at the cross where you and I enter the story of Holy Week. It is for our sins that Jesus is ridiculed, mocked, suffers and dies. The cross is what connects us with Christ, but in an ugly way that many would like to ignore. It makes us uncomfortable, because Jesus on the cross calls on us to look at ourselves and see the ugliness of our sin.

(pause)

But you know what? It is Palm Sunday and it is a joyous day! It's a joyous day for us because when we see Jesus on that cross and ask "Why?" and the vileness and wickedness of our sin hits us square in the face we know what to do with it. We turn right back to the cross. We understand that this Jesus dying on the cross is the very reason Christ is our King! We know that the sign above Christ's head which reads "The King of the Jews" is not mockery but truth. We know that Jesus is our King because there on the cross He is paying the penalty for our sins, ransoming us away from the former ruler of our life; sin, death and the power of the devil. It is at the cross where our ugly sins are lifted from us and transferred to Christ Jesus. And it is because of the cross that we can join with King Jesus in His victorious resurrection to everlasting life on Easter morning.

We are joyful today, even more joyful than those crowds on the first Palm Sunday. They thought Jesus was going to be merely an earthly king who would save them from mere earthly enemies. For them, the glorious atonement on the cross had yet to come. For us it is a done deal! When we processed in this morning we were following the cross. We sang "Hosanna!" which means "Lord save us!" and we knew it is already accomplished.

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday is a good combination because we who follow Christ's ugly cross do so joyfully. We know that Jesus went there willingly out of love for us. We know that His brutal suffering and agonizing death opened the doors of heaven so that our prayers for salvation are answered. The ugly cross calls us to repentance of our ugly sin, and Christ takes it all upon Himself for us. The cross reminds us that we have been baptized into Christ's death with our sins and baptized into resurrection without them.

We are joyful today because of the cross. As we acted it out this morning, we follow this cross with rejoicing and praise. We follow it today and throughout our lives, forgiven and made the righteousness of God. We follow it until at last we enter into the house of the Lord, the kingdom of our King Jesus, forever.