April 14th, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Palms/Passion

From Palms to Passion

1. Transitions

This morning, we take a difficult journey – we move from the jubilation and shouts of joy of Jesus coming into the heart of the city -- to cries of ‘crucify him.’ We move from praise and hope to demise and darkness. We move from life to death, at least for the time being. We began this service with enthusiasm, yet we end this service with the hushed acknowledgment that Jesus will and does die a gruesome, painful death.

It’s a theological paradox, it’s a grand challenge – to move you and me from the heights to the depths, but it is important. It is important because in order to experience the true rejoicing and beauty of that Easter morning, you have to make this transition. I can’t cheer it up for you, I can’t make it lighter than it is – and to try to do so would be a disservice to you. If you want to feel the impact that Easter brings to our hearts, our spiritual lives, and our very souls, we must mark this journey together.

II. Unending praise

Our journey today begins with enthusiasm, stark enthusiasm, where people are overjoyed and waving palms. There’s a few reasons they waved palms, and I imagine the primary one is this: to wave palms and lay them down on the road was a common practice in the ancient world to welcome home a war hero or a king. Other explanations might point to the use of palms in the festival of the booths in Leviticus or Deuteronomy, or the use of palms as a kind of award for those who were champions in sport. It seems though, whatever interpretation you take – is that palms are a sign of honour, respect, and glorification.

And as Jesus is riding a colt into the centre of the city, prophecies from Zechariah, Psalms, and Habakkuk are all falling into place. The people cannot stop their praising and when the Pharisees reprimand Jesus – telling him to stop this praising or calm it down, he says, “If these were silent, the stones would shout aloud.” The stones, even the stones of the earth that have no living or existence would rise up. In other words, Jesus is telling the Pharisees the reality in front of their face: There’s nothing, nothing in this world that can stop this moment.

II. Passion

But things turn, and they turn quickly. Where did the palms go? Where did the honour go? What happened to the cloaks on the ground and the shouting of joy? They turn to shouts of, “Crucify him!” Even Pilate, often given a hard time, is seen here trying to plead for Jesus’ life – saying that there are no grounds on which to convict him. It doesn’t make any sense – why would you release Barabbas – a murder – and crucify Jesus? And yet the voices climbed in their intensity and Pilate stepped back and let the voices rule.

Yet there are other voices too, voices still who weep and who are rightfully upset. Women are beating their breasts, completely beside themselves, grieving already, feeling the pain in their souls and their bodies. Jesus, even in these last hours, gives the women some pastoral care, assuring them they do not need to weep for him, but weep for this world where injustice rules.

As Jesus makes it up the hill with two other men, he is still getting tormented, “If you are the King of the Jews – save yourself, save us!” but the other sees Jesus’ innocence and sees he is the messiah, he asks for Jesus to remember him when he comes into his Kingdom.

I think there’s a poignant question here, one that we can never really answer fully in our human minds, but it’s a sensible question: Why didn’t Jesus save himself? Honestly, Jesus is King, he has the power to do anything, to stop his very death, to stop the death of others. We know all things are possible through God, and so we know that this is not the way it needs to be. Or at least, that’s how it can very well feel. It’s a question that I arrive at every Holy Week – why, why, why death – couldn’t there be some other atonement? Couldn’t there be another way that would still somehow fulfill prophecy? Why does the Saviour I love and worship, why does the reality of a gruesome, painful, awful scene of crucifixion need to be what happens? Is this what really need to happen for Easter to mean all that Easter means – can’t the resurrection happen some other way?

I can’t say I’ve ever had my question answered, or at least to the extent my human mind wants it to be answered. I’ve read, I’ve studied, and yet, I remain human – I want to save my Savior. And there’s a lot of theological reasons and jargon and ways you can navigate this question – but the truth is this: I may never fully understand it, you may never understand this cruxifixion in its full complexity – but I know that it is the truth and for Easter to mean anything – I need to go and sit in that darkness of Holy Week.

IV. Darkness

The darkness is a hard place. We speak about darkness in many ways in Scripture and in life. In light, things are revealed, in darkness, things are hidden. Yet, in this Holy Week, we sit in the darkness. We are not yet ready for the light of Easter – we will be – but not yet. In the darkness, we sit and watch and listen to Scripture. We sit and pray and recognize that our prayers may be more listening than speaking. We sit and hold the truth before us – this gruesome and painful truth before us – not seeking to explain it, not wishing to dismiss it, but living with it.

V. The Challenge?

Every week I try to leave you with an opportunity, an invitation, and perhaps something hopeful and inspiring to cultivate your faith during the week. Yet here, today – that’s not my job. I can’t make this nicer, or neater, or calmer, or take away the chaos or the deafening silence that is Holy Week. I can’t tell you it will be all better soon, even if it will, because we aren’t there yet – we can’t jump the ship and go to safe land – we’ve got to swim in the murky waters first.

The only thing I can do is invite you to the darkness. Not a darkness that paralyzes or invites you to the depths of depression – that’s a different darkness. Again, I invite you to the darkness of hearing Scripture, of praying, of listening, of not eating the Easter egg yet. Stay with me, stay for a while, in the uncomfortable space that it is – stay with me in the place where those women in Jerusalem cried where they felt no hope of their Savior alive – stay with me in the grief – stay with me in the questions. Stay with me, wait with me, and at the right time, in the right way, we together will find the light again. Amen.