

FIRST THERE WERE HOSANNAS

Luke 19:29-40

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14 April 2019

Shouldn't church make life easier? Is that too much to ask? Because life is hard. We've been talking during the season of Lent about the particular aspects of life that are difficult - the shadows of loneliness, fear, anger, shame. We all know that much of the news is depressing. Overwhelming, even. We want church to be the one thing that's easy. We like those passages where Jesus promises to help carry our burdens. We long for the comfort of God's presence, the God of the 23rd Psalm who makes us lie down in green pastures, who leads us beside still waters, the God who restores our souls. Life is hard. We need a respite, a sanctuary, a break from it all.

In every culture, there are - and there have always been - festivals and holidays, celebrations that provide a necessary break from the monotony of constant work. Whether one is celebrating the new year or a wedding or whether the celebration is religious in nature, a festival is a kind of escape valve, a healthy way for people to release stress and restore a sense of joy and community.

The Passover Festival is the Jewish celebration of their liberation from slavery in Egypt, a remembrance of the bold leadership of Moses who stood up to the Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go." In the time of Jesus, this springtime festival is celebrated in Jerusalem. The normal population of Jerusalem swells by thousands. Crowds are everywhere, and you know what they say about crowd mentality...Jesus' followers, those who were close to him, and those just hanging around the sidelines feel emboldened because of the throngs of people.

The Roman army enters Jerusalem, too. They have to be there. To keep the peace, they say. Well, that's one way to look at it. To remind the people of who's really in charge - that's closer to the truth. It's a dangerous mix - to have huge numbers of politically oppressed poor people all in one place, all remembering the story of their past liberation. Rome knows how quickly things can get out of hand.

And what about Jesus? What is he thinking and feeling on this first Palm Sunday morning? Scholars and people of faith disagree. Some think that he is a faithful, obedient actor in a play. He knows that God has a divine part for him and - though the human side of him feels afraid and reluctant - he is determined to be used by God. Other people see it this way. Jesus is doing what he always did in his life. He's living each day as a faithful Jew, so of course he's going to enter Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. If he encounters trouble along the way, he'll deal with it. If he encounters people along the way who need healing or teaching, he'll offer that as well.

Everyone loves a parade, everyone needs a reason to celebrate, and on Palm Sunday, cheering for Jesus is like rooting for the winning team. "Hosanna", say the people who have heard Jesus speak and who deeply love him. "Hosanna" say the fair-weather fans who are just now jumping on the bandwagon. They tear palm branches off the trees and treat him like a king, even though he's riding that most humble of all animals, a stark contrast to the way the imperial army is entering the city at the very same time.

The crowds shout, "Hosanna" which means "Save Us" or "Help Us", "Save us," they said. "Hosanna". Be the Messiah we want you to be. Save us now. Save us from Rome who taxes us unfairly to the point of poverty. Save us from the despair that

creeps into our dreams at night. Save us from the fears we have for our children's future. Save us, the way Moses did.

Isn't that what we all want? To be saved? In the broadest sense of that word? Don't we, too, long for salvation from the forces of evil that are so apparent in our world every single time we even glance at the news? Save us from racism so pernicious it led to the burning this spring of three African-American churches in Louisiana. Save us from bigotry that led to the killing of worshipers in New Zealand this spring. Save us from the epidemic of violence, save us from our tendency to numb ourselves instead of engaging in the work of transformation. Save our planet, dear God, especially when it seems like we've waited too long to start trying. Save us from our idolatry when we act as if we can shop and buy and spend and eat and drink and distract ourselves rather than becoming the faithful disciples God needs us to be.

Like our worshiping ancestors on that first Palm Sunday morning, we too long to be saved. We long for Jesus, and the church that bears his name, to make our lives easier.

But he doesn't. He's not the Messiah we want, the one who comes to relieve us from all pain and suffering. He is the one who says, "Walk with me. Follow me." We are not going around pain; no, we're going to walk right towards it.

One writer says that Palm Sunday is an irony parade. It's the day we wave and cheer for the kind of king we didn't end up getting.

The week starts with Hosannas, but soon the city that welcomes him will scream for his blood. We don't like where this parade ends up. Jesus marches straight towards suffering.

The preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that Christianity is the only world religion that worships a God that suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, the God who suffers, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering. But the God we have doesn't try to avoid pain and suffering - instead, through Jesus, pain and suffering are redeemed. God's power is not used to end human pain. God's power is used to pick up the shattered pieces of our lives and make something holy out of them. That is the power of a suffering God, not to prevent pain but redeem it, by going through it with us. This is the God we meet in Jesus this holy week. This is the God of the cross.

The God of the cross demands something of us - we call it discipleship. Discipleship is not an easy way of life. Look at people who have done it well...people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He started his life as a Lutheran pastor in Germany - it was a good life, not terribly demanding. But when Hitler began to change everything, Bonhoeffer's conscience was pricked. He could no longer just serve as a parish pastor, ignoring the evils around him. He spoke up, he formed resistance groups, and eventually felt led to join a plot to assassinate Hitler - participating in an evil act but for a greater good. He wrote a book called The Cost of Discipleship - for him discipleship ended up costing his life.

If you want to know what discipleship looks like today, I point you towards Shane Claiborne. I don't know anyone more committed to living what he believes. He lives in an intentional Christian community in inner-city Philadelphia, and he has been jailed for advocating for the homeless. This Tuesday night he'll be at Pilgrim UCC in Tremont talking about his latest book which is called Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence. He takes it seriously when the Bible says that we are to beat our

weapons into gardening implements. Tuesday night he will give the audience the chance to take a hammer to a gun. His heart is breaking at the fact that the United States has 105 gun deaths a day, and he believes Jesus' heart is breaking as well. Shane Claiborne walks the hard walk of discipleship.

Discipleship means realizing that we don't get to choose the God we want, the God of easy answers. There is no easy way to walk from Palm Sunday to Easter. When we peel back the layers of pain and suffering of Holy Week, we will find a God whose power and knowledge is love. Read through the stories of this week and you will find a God who weeps for us. We will find a God who in humility serves us. We find a God who, out of love, forgives us "because we do not know what we do." By the end of Holy Week we will have stripped Jesus of all his titles. Jesus is not the Lord or Savior or King that we want. But the God we worship is the God we need, the God of redemptive love.

This is the God who says to us, "I will walk with you through every shadow experience of your life. I will hold your hand through addiction and dementia, through divorce and bankruptcy, through cancer and through the death of the person dearest to you. I will be by your side when you're disappointed and when it's your dream that has died. Together we will walk through those shadows and when you emerge on the other side, you will realize who you are. You will find your courage and your voice. And like Jesus you will rise." But there is no rising without pain. There is no Easter without Good Friday. There is no resurrection without the agonizing death of the crucifixion.

First there were Hosannas. Then came the shouts of "Crucify Him."

Among other inspirations for this sermon was "What's In a Name", the Rev. Sarah D. Odderston.