

Isaiah 50:4-9a

- 4 The Lord God gave me an educated tongue
to know how to respond to the weary
with a word that will awaken them in the morning.[b]
God awakens my ear in the morning to listen,
as educated people do.
- 5 The Lord God opened my ear;
I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back.
- 6 Instead, I gave my body to attackers,
and my cheeks to beard pluckers.
I didn't hide my face
from insults and spitting.
- 7 The Lord God will help me;
therefore, I haven't been insulted.
Therefore, I set my face like flint,
and knew I wouldn't be ashamed.
- 8 The one who will declare me innocent is near.
Who will argue with me?
Let's stand up together.
Who will bring judgment against me?
Let him approach me.
- 9 Look! The Lord God will help me.
Who will condemn me?

Psalms 31:9-16

- 9 Have mercy on me, Lord, because I'm depressed.
My vision fails because of my grief,
as do my spirit and my body.
- 10 My life is consumed with sadness;
my years are consumed with groaning.
Strength fails me because of my suffering;[a]
my bones dry up.
- 11 I'm a joke to all my enemies,
still worse to my neighbors.
I scare my friends,
and whoever sees me in the street runs away!
- 12 I am forgotten, like I'm dead,
completely out of mind;
I am like a piece of pottery, destroyed.
- 13 Yes, I've heard all the gossiping,
terror all around;
so many gang up together against me,
they plan to take my life!
- 14 But me? I trust you, Lord!
I affirm, "You are my God."
- 15 My future is in your hands.
Don't hand me over to my enemies,
to all who are out to get me!

16 Shine your face on your servant;
save me by your faithful love!

Philippians 2:5-11

5 Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

6 Though he was in the form of God,

he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

7 But he emptied himself

by taking the form of a slave

and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,

8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore, God highly honored him

and gave him a name above all names,

10 so that at the name of Jesus everyone

in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow

11 and every tongue confess that

Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Luke 19:41-48

41 As Jesus came to the city and observed it, he wept over it. 42 He said, "If only you knew on this of all days the things that lead to peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 The time will come when your enemies will build fortifications around you, encircle you, and attack you from all sides. 44 They will crush you completely, you and the people within you. They won't leave one stone on top of another within you, because you didn't recognize the time of your gracious visit from God."

45 When Jesus entered the temple, he threw out those who were selling things there. 46 He said to them, "It's written, My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a hideout for crooks." [c]

47 Jesus was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests, the legal experts, and the foremost leaders among the people were seeking to kill him. 48 However, they couldn't find a way to do it because all the people were enthralled with what they heard.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Why do we wave these branches? Why do we fling our coats to the ground? Who do we believe this Jesus to be, that we give such strikingly strange offerings? In this American election season where every candidate seems to draw an irrationally passionate following, I wonder if we just expect Jesus to be our preferred candidate for office, if we just want Jesus to be the one leader whose platform aligns most accurately with our own interests. The one whom we feel we can control with our campaign contributions. Do we honor this man on a donkey because we want him to bear the burdens of our expectations?

We celebrate today because the king returns to Jerusalem, ready to take up his throne! Except, his throne is no regal chair, no cushioned couch, but instead a

splintered, wooden cross. This king's crown is not gilded. There are no gems that sparkle brightly upon his head, but rather thorns that pierce his brow as blood glistens down. He wears no silken gowns, nor shining armor, for his own clothes were torn away. Naked and walking toward his penultimate throne, a journey alien even to Cersei Lannister, our king begins this week on a donkey, and ends this week descended into hell. So again I ask: why do we wave these palms?

Palm Sunday is a dangerous holiday. Yes, dangerous. It's dangerous because we become part of the story of Christ's crucifixion. We dive into the Biblical narrative as though it were a script. We participate in the fun of the event, without truly knowing the meaning of our actions. Perhaps Jesus was speaking also of us when he said, "Forgive them, Father, for they just don't know what they're doing."

You see, even on that first Palm Sunday, people waved these plants because, as even the Pharisees saw, they were enthralled with Jesus. Jesus seemed untouchable, unstoppable, unbreakable, even in the face of Roman oppression. While we hear much about Pharisees and Sadducees and even the Essenes, they weren't the most popular group of Jews in Jerusalem at this point. That honor belonged to the Zealots.

The Zealots, you see, were known for their zeal – hence the name Zealot – in seeking God's messiah, the king of kings, the son of David and son of God who the prophets promised would return God's favor to Jerusalem, who the prophets promised would return God's blessing to God's people. The prophets even said that this messiah would be seen doing miracles, like healing the sick and raising the dead – check for Jesus – and that this messiah would return to Jerusalem riding on a donkey – double check. *Have you*

heard of this guy Jesus? You know, the one who healed Blind Bartimaeus and pulled Lazarus out of the tomb alive even after four days of death? Yeah, that guy is riding in on a donkey, fulfilling the prophets' words. The revolution starts now.

A revolution, you see, because the Zealots wanted not just their preferred political ruler in Jerusalem, but they also wanted to boot Rome out. They wanted to see Pilate's defeat. They wanted to see every last member of Herod's family gone. They wanted nothing short of a war that would forever establish Israel as an independent and free state. That's what they wanted from Jesus.

But, as we all know, that's not what Jesus gave to them. Now, don't get me wrong. Palm Sunday was a political moment. Jesus did mean to overthrow Rome, but he also meant to overthrow the rest of the world as well. As God's Messiah, Jesus is riding in to make all things new, not

just the ones we don't like so we can come into power ourselves. Jesus didn't meet their expectations, and boy do they turn on him quickly. One of the keys to reading the Holy Week story is "the multitudes" or "the crowd" or "the people." The same word is used for the people who welcome Jesus on Palm Sunday and also the people who call for his crucifixion before Pilate. There are deathly consequences for this misunderstood messiah. And on this day, we become part of that crowd. Boy, did we turn on him quickly.

Here on Palm Sunday, we stare down the barrel of Holy Week, knowing full well that our false expectations lead to Jesus' death. That we share responsibility for the nails in his hands and feet, the spear in his side, the lashes on his back, and the thorns on his head. How appropriate is it that we see so many of these palm-branch crosses, that we turn our expressions of joy into implements of torture! Palm Sunday is

the fleeting passion of a confused crowd that says, finally we get what we want! Quickly, though, we realize that Jesus hasn't come to meet our expectations. We won't always get what we want from him.

But the message of Palm Sundays turn to Holy Week is that neither will we get what we deserve. We deserve abandonment, for we abandoned Jesus to death. We deserve justice, for our unjust mob mentality convicted Jesus of crimes he never committed. The heart of Jesus is that, even though we deserve the worst and Jesus deserves the best, on the cross Jesus takes on the worst so that we can have the best.

Now, let me say that bumper sticker theology isn't always the most helpful. It often oversimplifies things that are quite complex. But I saw one of these short, pithy sayings this week that really helped to illuminate what's happening in this Holy Week journey, one that helps us to understand how

this week will unfold. It goes something like this: "Justice is getting what we deserve. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting what we don't deserve."

Think about that. Justice is getting what we deserve. That's not necessarily a negative thing. Think about our political sphere. Justice means both that criminals should receive commensurate punishment and that citizens should receive equal rights. Mercy applies to particularly the view of justice as punishment, for mercy means we don't get the fullness of what we deserve. Mercy leads to reduced sentences, to work release, to probation. Grace, though, is getting what we don't deserve. Grace is a pardon, not just of the punishment, but of the crime itself. It's a new identity that says, though you might have committed a crime, you are not considered guilty. You are free and forgiven. Your crime has no effect on your future, on your identity. On the cross, we see justice, mercy, and grace entwined.

The cross is justice not because Jesus needed punished on our behalf, but because we see the ultimate result of our own sin. We convict and kill God. We take the life of the one who gave us life. Rather than hail him with branches, we nail Jesus to tree trunks. Our justice is found in the fact that we killed the only one who could offer us mercy, who could give us grace. We see what we deserve when we separate ourselves from God.

The cross is mercy because, though we deserve absolute and final punishment for our pride, our vanity, our outsized egos, we instead find grace. We are not upon that cross, nor does God hold that cross against us. God voids the punishment we deserve, though we surely deserve it, and so we swim in a red-tinted mercy that flows from the cross of Jesus.

The cross is grace because through it we get something entire undeserved. Abundant life. Through his willingness to

submit to our petulant cries from **hosanna** to **crucify him**, through his willingness to follow our whims and wills that lead to his death, Jesus carried with him no spite, no hatred, but deep, abiding, life-giving love. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, which are always, always, always tied together, we receive the new lease on life that we never deserved. We receive the image of God that we lost in Eden. We receive the Holy Spirit's breath that drained out of the dust of our lives.

We enter the story today, but our journey is far from over. We walk with palm branches in our hands and hosannas on our lips for a time, but soon, our sin – that we think we know better than God what we need, that we know better what God should do about our brokenness and despair – that becomes all too loud on our lips. And our hands lash out, throwing down our palms in order to nail to the cross our one hope for redemption.

Fortunately for us all, this is still our King, even if it's not the king we expect. This is still our God, even if it's not the God we want. Even our worst can't keep us from God's best, and God's best is exactly what we need. Thank God that when we our expectations of Jesus are so misguided, he carries our burdens even beyond justice to a place where there is mercy and grace for us all. Amen.