

Sermon Title: Shouting for a Savior
Text: Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40
© The Rev. Dr. Charles Valenti-Hein

April 1, 2007
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Palm Sunday

It's unavoidable, I suppose, that we tend to make something of a mush out of Sundays like this in the church year. It's such a familiar story, and the elements are so dear, that it seems almost an annoyance to consider the details. I probably date myself with the reference, but I think of the musical *Gigi*, and the song that was sung by Maurice Chevalier and Hermione Gingold: "Ah, Yes! I Remember It Well!"

"We met at nine. We met at eight. I was on time. No, you were late. Ah yes! I remember it well. We dined with friends. We dined alone. A tenor sang. A baritone. Ah yes! I remember it well...It warms my heart to know that you remember still the way you do. Ah yes! I remember it well."

Palm Sunday is something like that...told by all four of the Gospel writers, but with just enough difference that it's a little irritating to pay attention. It's certainly easier to let it dwell in blessed memory as it's been passed on to us year after year: a giddy, rambunctious celebration to begin the Easter week, with children, and palms, huge crowds, and bright brass accompanying the procession. I suppose I could have offered an only slightly more modern allusion to the cinema but playing the theme to *Rocky*—the mighty fighter entering the ring, or maybe the *Star Wars* Theme, with Luke and Princess Leia standing proudly before the confederation. You get the idea, and I suppose it's what we tend to "remember well" of the import of this day: the underdog conqueror, come to claim that which is rightly his. Only it's Jesus, not Sylvester Stallone; the Pharisees and High Priests, not Darth Vader.

It's tempting to let the image stand, and frankly it's widely reinforced in the religion portrayed by that same media. It's been three years now since Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ" was the talk of the season, and I've still managed to avoid seeing it, but the core message I've heard from it, from enough reviews and outtakes to make me comfortable in *not* seeing it, is really right along these lines: *Rocky* meets the Gospel, as Jesus takes everything Rome can throw at him in graphic detail, and yet prevails. It's a story about *them*—the terrible people who killed an innocent man, the thick religious folk who refused to see what was obvious, the erstwhile followers who one by one disappear, and at the center, Jesus, who takes it all—bears the sins of the world—in humble obedience to his call. It's a great story, and an easy story to tell. But—maybe it's *because*—it's all about *them*.

You see, in all such tellings of Palm Sunday that I can think of there's one thing glaringly absent. It's an absence I became acutely aware of as I allowed myself in these past couple of weeks to listen carefully just to *Luke*—to let *his* story guide me to this morning, and to the week this morning is calling us into. It's a subtle but telling difference between Luke and the other Gospel accounts that got me to thinking. The rest, you see, talk of a *great crowd* that assembled as Jesus entered Jerusalem. John explains by putting the entry into Jerusalem right on the heels of the raising of Lazarus, which even today, I suspect, would attract no small amount of notice. For Matthew, Mark, and John, this is a mob scene. But Luke's really very different.

Jesus is all but alone with his disciples as he approaches the gate of the city, and he sends two out ahead to find a colt on which he would ride into Jerusalem. The two barely stir up interest. Imagine two folk coming into downtown Appleton, and stealing a car. The owner comes along, and the two just look up, and say, “my boss needs a car...” And the owner shrugs? This is a strange story, indeed!

And then, in Luke’s telling it’s those who had accompanied Jesus thus far who put their coats on the poor beast who was straining under the weight of the Savior of the nations, and then continue to spread them before Jesus as their makeshift procession continues. Luke offers no kids climbing up into tree to tear off branches, no shouting hoards...just those who had accompanied Jesus thus far, nervously coming to Passover with the clear recollection that Jesus had told them not long ago, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him...” I’m not sure how much comfort they could have taken, with those images ringing in their ears, of Jesus’ cryptic conclusion: “and on the third day he will rise again.” What I know is that in such a context, I think I would have been more than a little cautious, and my joyful shouts would have been accompanied by pounding heart when I saw the Pharisees standing in the middle of the road, waiting to intercept the odd procession.

I can’t judge Jesus’ composure at the center of this vortex. The only thing Luke gives me is that Jesus understood the inevitability of it all: “If these were silent, the stones would shout out!” But I think I get what the *rest* must have been feeling, and it’s in their place, I’m reminded, that I will find my own. This is no circus parade...a happy lark to fill a drowsy Sunday morning. This is life and death. More precisely, this is *death*, or at least its wheels slowly grinding. And it’s not about a confrontation between Jesus and *them*. This story is all about *me*.

The scene is over almost before it begins, as the Pharisees silently disappear, and Jesus looked out over the city with tears in his eyes. It’s not clear to whom he was talking, but remember that the “throng” in Luke’s telling were only that gaggle of disciples who’d been traveling with him. “If you, only you, had understood the things that make for peace...but now they are hidden from your eyes.” There’s no packing things up and coming back next Sunday for Easter eggs and candy in Luke’s telling. There’s no reading the newspapers next Sunday morning to read who wins the battle of the titans, and then coming to Church to sing “alleluia!” If anything, this story in Luke is an air raid siren cutting through the midday silence: Watch what is about to happen, because in the end, it is all about *you*.

I was fairly challenged, as we discussed all this on Wednesday evening during our Lenten study, as to why, given how different Luke’s telling of this day, we persist in celebrating it as we do. Why not peel away the shouts and palms and singing children, and instead let the day be what it is in Scripture: a tense confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, with a gaggle of nervous disciples looking on? One of those gathered answered honestly enough: traditions die hard! I thought of one of the first Christmas Eves in my church in Milwaukee when I dared suggest that the Magi not show up until Matthew gave the cue...I was not well received in my biblical scholarship!

But there's more to it than that here. I think you know me well enough to understand that I will press back if I think pressing is what's in order. I think, I suggested to them, that we need to find *ourselves* in this narrative that starts today, and winds its way through the events of the next week, and more specifically, we need to find our *voice*, or more properly what our voices *say* as we move from this Sunday, through the Upper Room, into the Garden, and Pilate's court, back out the city gates to the dung heap of Golgatha. Our mouths need to shape the words that are assigned to Jesus' followers, if we are to grasp the fullness of our humanity, and in grasping our humanity, to comprehend why it is that we do, indeed, *need* the saving act which lies at the center of this story.

We need to feel with our own features how quickly joyous shouts of acclamation turn to fearful silence; how our promises *never* to forsake are denied by the cock's crow; how the seduction of silver not only can, but *does* make betrayers of us all; how lips that sing "blessed" can turn by week's end to contorted mouths that demand crucifixion, and know only Caesar as our god. Our eyes need to feel the stinging tears of our brokenness, because, so the fundamental story of this week that is to come insists, it is *only* through those tears that we can see the truth of a tomb, laid bare on Sunday morning.

We need Palm Sunday, in short, not because it is sufficient for our faith, but because if we do not start here, we can't get where we need to go: our lives, intentions, hopes, dreams, dashed at the foot of the cross, so that our True Hope can meet us, not at the grave, but in the world, along the road, at table when bread is broken and our hearts will burn.

I'm not naïve. I know that the greater majority of us will find some way to evade the truth of this day. We, like the twelve who scattered out of the garden, will find better places to be, on Thursday, on Friday, on Saturday. But I suppose that's okay, too, because the truth is that the Lord managed to make it through cross and grave without a single one of his disciples in attendance. The *story* must be told, in its entirety—palms, and donkeys and singing children and brass—because it is in the totality of the story; in our praise, and fear, denial, and flight, terror, and wonder, that our salvation is finally wrought, not by *anything* we can do, but by the God who so desperately loves this world that even death will not keep us apart.

So walk along. Listen for the parts you don't quite remember, and for that which is so familiar that it is etched in your heart. Find, in the midst of it all, the mind of Christ, who, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross."

Because it is there, at the very heart of this world's darkness, that you will begin to see the flickering flame of salvation. "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Let us pray.