

THE PASSION
Matthew 26:57-68; 27:1-2, 11-14, 27-31, 33-37
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Today we remember Christ's triumphant march into Jerusalem and the crowds greeting him with loud shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." In joyful expectation they waved their palms in the air and draped their cloaks on the road. Finally, after hundreds of years of painful waiting God finally heard their prayers and sent the Messiah to save them.

However, in hindsight, Palm Sunday seems similar to the loud celebrations that sent the Titanic off on her maiden voyage. Five days later the great ship God himself couldn't sink went under taking 1,500 lives with her. Premature celebrations never anticipate tragic outcomes.

They came to Jerusalem celebrating the Passover, their ancestors' liberation from bondage in Egypt. But though they were restored to the Promised Land, their liberation was incomplete. Still in bondage now the Romans were their new masters. They were oppressed and persecuted, held prisoner in their own country. They hated their King, Herod Antipas, a puppet of the Romans. Understandably the Jews were anxious for the restoration of the House of David so they could again become the great nation God called them to be.

That's why they were so quick to welcome Jesus as their quick fix; God's anointed one, the new King David who would restore Jerusalem as the new capital of the world. Now instead of giving tribute to Rome, Israel would be on the receiving end. Jerusalem would become the new center of wealth and power and their God would be glorified in this new world system.

Unfortunately what they couldn't grasp was Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world. They wanted a political solution, not spiritual reclamation and transformation; and when they realized Jesus wasn't the Messiah they wanted, he was rejected faster than they embraced him. They could not or would not comprehend God's ways are not our ways.

Before we dismiss these people for their shallow patriotism and shortsightedness, let's admit most likely we do the same thing. That's why the African-American spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" is included in our hymn books. In situations similar we make the same bad choices, rejecting God's ways and going against God's will, because we either think we know better, or we just don't want to deny ourselves and pick up our crosses.

We name this day Palm Sunday after the palm branches they waved as banners to welcome the coming of God's Kingdom. But Palm Sunday was a false start. Did you ever hear the term "false spring"? Sometimes in the middle of winter you wake up to spring-like temperatures. The sun is out, the air is warm and you dress like it's April or May. But the next day winter comes back with a vengeance and we realize we still have to endure winter until the real spring finally arrives.

Palm Sunday is like a false spring day. It's a happy holiday, but it's a false start, and when it's over we must still endure the pain of Holy Week and especially Good Friday before we can celebrate any promise of resurrection and new life.

That's why in recent years many churches have renamed this day Passion Sunday. Several years ago Mel Gibson's controversial film, *The Passion* was criticized for its brutal portrayal of Christ's crucifixion. Some critics denounced it for being too bloody and gruesome and anyway wasn't Jesus a great teacher and really, isn't that how we should remember him? Those critics got it all wrong. Sure Jesus was a great teacher, but Jesus didn't just come to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony; he was born to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

Seven hundred years before Christ, Isaiah spelled out his mission:

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases.
But he was wounded for our
transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment
that made us whole...
Yet it was the will of God
to crush him with pain...

(Isaiah 53:4-5; 10)

Gibson wasn't wrong forcing us to watch the bloody horror of Christ's passion, but what he failed to do, or could not do, was reveal the full extent of Christ's suffering, and by that I mean his inner suffering. Gibson could graphically portray his physical torture, but how could he expose his unspeakable spiritual anguish?

None of us could ever even begin to imagine the horrific weight of all the sins of the world crushing Jesus' soul. Every second on the cross equaled an eternity in hell as he took into his body the guilt and punishment for all the sins ever committed. And remember, Jesus himself was completely innocent and without sin. According to the Law of Moses, only a lamb without blemish could be sacrificed for the sins of the nation, and now, only Jesus could be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Question: Why did Jesus go through with it? Why would anyone be willing to die in the place of corrupt politicians like Pilate, hypocritical religious leaders like Caiaphas, shallow, fickle people like those who embraced and then rejected him in less than one week, and fair weather friends, like his disciples who betrayed, denied and abandoned him all in one night? Would you be willing to die for people like that?

The only possible reason for Christ accepting his cross was his intense love for humanity and his equally intense desire to be obedient to his Father's will. God wanted us back and God was willing to pay the price.

Another question: Since God is God and God can do anything he wants, even change his own rules, why did Jesus need to suffer? Couldn't God simply forgive and let us off the hook, sort of a "let bygones be bygones" type of deal?

Maybe this is one reason we call Christ's crucifixion the "mystery of the cross" and we are invited to step into the mystery of the Passion. Again, God's ways are not our ways, God's ways are mysterious; suffering itself is an incomprehensible mystery. But perhaps this partial explanation will satisfy: just as God's love is perfect and must be satisfied, so too God's justice is perfect and must be satisfied. There's no such thing as cheap grace. Someone must pay the price and that someone is Christ.

You may remember me telling the story of the White Russian commander who led a company of soldiers against the Communists during the Russian Civil War. It was winter and they were running out of food. Many of the soldiers were joined by their families and they were on strict rations.

One night the commander was told someone was stealing food. He said, "Whoever is caught must be punished and receive 20 lashes."

The next day he was told, "We caught the thief; it's your own mother."

The Commander said "Justice must still be satisfied. The sentence stands, but I will take the punishment."

The critics who panned Gibson's movie for highlighting the extent of Christ's suffering probably think all this talk of Christ's death for our salvation is foolishness. They won't deny Jesus was crucified, but they can't believe Jesus died for the sins of the world. It doesn't make sense, it isn't rational, it's foolishness.

Apparently the Apostle Paul, a Jew and a Pharisee, heard his critics say he was foolish for embracing Christ's passion. That's why he wrote:

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...Jews demand signs, Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (Corinthians 1:18, 22-24)

As you go through your daily routines this Holy Week be aware of the Crucified Christ's presence in every person you meet and every situation you encounter, and be especially aware of the Crucified Christ's presence living in and if you let him, through you. And when you find yourself betraying, denying or abandoning Christ, when you catch yourself sinning, head straight to the foot of the cross, watch Jesus suffer for your sins, ask to be forgiven, and then thank him for laying down his life for his friends.