

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Luke 19:28-40

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Covenant Pres. Church

Feasting and Fasting: Where in the crowd are you?
By Clara D. Thompson

If this is your first Palm Sunday worship experience, it must seem pretty odd: people of all ages waving palm branches in church and singing hosanna – not exactly an everyday sort of word, even for church folks. If you grew up in the church however, Palm Sunday is one of those days that evokes a lot of memories, many of us still remember waving palm branches in the children's processional as a youngster. Whether it's your first time at a Palm Sunday service of worship, or your first recollection of the day goes back 60, 70, 80 years or more, Palm Sunday is a day filled with memorable images. We can imagine the dusty road filled with fellow pilgrims making their journey to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover. We can picture Jesus and his disciples approaching Jerusalem, Jesus riding on the back of a borrowed colt. In our imaginations we can see the crowds parting before him, lining the road, spreading their very garments on the road. Though Luke's Gospel gives no account of palm branches, Matthew, Mark, and John all mention branches cut from nearby trees, with John's Gospel actually naming them as palm branches. If we listen really carefully we can hear the people rejoicing and praising God with a loud voice; we can hear the shouts of Hosanna echoing through the centuries. And we can place ourselves in that crowd and imagine what it must have felt like to be a part of such a gathering. Especially knowing the rest of the story, the rest of the events of this coming Holy Week, we can join the Palm Sunday procession; shout our own praises to God; rejoice with the crowd and sing our Hosannas. We can put ourselves right in the midst of it all and join in the celebration. There's excitement in the air and we know we're backing a winner.

The disciples and Passover pilgrims were cheering on Jesus, weren't they? "Go get 'em, Jesus! Take on the Romans! Save the day, Jesus. We know you can do it!" But where are those same cheerleaders later in the week? What happened between Sunday and Thursday when Jesus had his Last Supper with his disciples, or Friday when he hung on a cross? Where were they when the feasting of Thursday night turned to the unintentional fasting which so often accompanies deep grief? Where did the faithful go then? Where were they in the garden when Jesus prayed and the few disciples who were with him kept falling asleep? Where were they when the vote was taken in Pilate's judgment hall? Where were they when the roar came back "Barabbas!" Release Barabbas, not Jesus. Where were the Palm Sunday celebrators then?

The crowds shifted as the week progressed. Those who lay branches and garments on the road would fall away. They would turn from backing Jesus to denying him. Their fleeting faith would give up quickly and would not stand the trial. Oh, many of them would still be a part a crowd as the week progressed, but the crowds of praise would turn to crowds of betrayal. And yet, these are the very people for whom Jesus died.

How like the Holy Week crowds you and I are. When it looks like we're backing a winner, we're all in. When and where Jesus is accepted as Lord and Savior, we can be as enthusiastic as the next Christian. At church, we can sing with gusto and pray with conviction. We can shout our Hosannas! But in the Thursdays and the Fridays of our own lives, it's not quite so easy. In our own lives we can be tempted to follow the crowd even when the crowd denies Jesus, even when the voice of the crowd calls for hatred rather than love. Oh, we may not verbalize our disregard for Christ, but our actions speak louder than words.

Where will we be as the week progresses, as this Holy Week unfolds? Where will we be when Jesus calls us to walk the difficult road? When people say things that are hateful and hurtful and when they throw insults as well as stones? Where will we be when the man is sleeping in the garbage dumpster because at least there he has shelter from the wind and the rain? Where are we when the child at school says she's just not hungry, but reality is there's no money in her lunch account? Where are we when the single parent tries to raise the children alone, balancing job and family, trying to do the impossible job of doing it all well? Where are we? Where are you? Where am I? Jill Duffield, editor of Outlook magazine, cautions us when she writes, "Palm Sunday praises devoid of the passion (the suffering and death of Jesus) make for a hollow, dangerous religion. When we fail to keep following Jesus the next day and the next and the next, all the way to the cross, we envision a Christianity synonymous with winning, rather than a faith that requires vulnerable love and sacrifice."

My friends, this is a week for crowds. We join the Palm Sunday crowd this morning; next Sunday it will be the Easter crowd. Both of these crowds are enjoyable and it's fun to be a part of it all. But Thursday and Friday come in between. The crowds here at church will be smaller as we gather for worship on Thursday night and again on Friday. Those services are not as much fun, though perhaps more meaningful. It's easier to shout our Hosannas and our "Hip Hip Hoorays" than it is to join in the intimacy of Christ's Last Supper with his disciples, easier than it is to wait and watch at the foot of the cross.

Ann Weems, a beloved Presbyterian poet laureate who died a couple of years ago, has written a poem entitled "Holy Week," found in her book, *Kneeling in Jerusalem*. A shout-out goes to our Covenant librarian who has displayed the book prominently in the Library these past several weeks. Listen to these words from Ann Weems:

Holy Week

Holy is the week ...
Holy, consecrated, belonging to God ...
We move from hosannas to horror
 with the predictable ease
 of those who know not what they do.
Our hosannas sung,
 our palms waved,
let us go with passion into this week.
It is a time to curse fig trees that do not yield fruit.
It is a time to cleanse our temples of any blasphemy.
It is a time to greet Jesus as the Lord's Anointed One,
 to lavishly break our alabaster
 and pour perfume out for him
 without counting the cost.
It is a time for preparation ...
The time to give thanks and break bread is upon us.
The time to give thanks and drink of the cup is imminent.
Eat, drink, remember:
On this night of nights, each one must ask,
 as we dip our bread in the wine,
 "Is it I?"

And on that darkest of days, each of us must stand
 beneath the tree
and watch the dying
 if we are to be there
when the stone is rolled away.
The only road to Easter morning
 is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday.

Only then will the alleluias be sung;
 only then will the dancing begin.

Dear friends, this is a week of crowds. The crowds will shift as the week progresses, both in size and in tone. As you live out your life this coming week, what crowds will you belong to? Will people see you as a part of the faithful followers, or will you be among those who deny him when the going gets tough? Don't leave your palm branches at church. Hail him as king throughout the week, even on Thursday, even on Friday. Especially on Thursday, especially on Friday.

Let us pray: Wondrous God, as we continue our journey into Holy Week, help us to walk boldly into your story, knowing that you will ultimately triumph. Lead us to the Table and to the Cross, and then to the Empty Tomb. In our Savior's name we pray, Amen.