

Haydenville Congregational Church
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From Palms, to Passion, to Possibility

MARK 11:1-10 and 13:32-37 and 15:1-5

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts are acceptable in thy sight O God, our rock and our redeemer.

Today, Palm Sunday, commemorates Jesus' procession with his disciples into the Jewish religious capital, Jerusalem

From his ministry in the countryside, down from the Mount of Olives

Riding on a donkey.

Palms were laid out before him by a group of mainly marginalized people—women and peasants--and they hailed him as a new king.

But today is also the day that moves us into what is called

The Passion of Jesus, Holy week the last week of Jesus' life.

Some people have said this journey from palm Sunday to holy week is like a roller coaster ride--we go up and down, having hope and then despair, fear and then ambivalence, excitement and then tragedy...

Today *is* an jubilant day.

As you may know, Jesus scholars John Dominick Crossan and Marcus Borg call Jesus' march into Jerusalem from the East, down from the Mt of Olives a *counter procession*.

For on that day there was another

Procession entering the city—Pontius Pilot, the Roman governor rode in from the west with his royal entourage-- cavalry, foot soldiers, and with clinking gold armor and weaponry, in order to be in town for the Jewish celebration of the Passover.

They came to reinforce the power of the Roman Empire and squelch any possible rebellion from Roman rule.

Borg and Crossan compare Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a nonviolent response—a counterdemonstration to this display of power—a march like some of the ones we know of, the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and freedom to name just one example.

The day was a symbolic victory of autonomy over subjugation
Ancient cultural tradition, justice, and religious freedom
Over empire and colonization.
There was singing and cheering, and the people laid down palms and cloaks
to show their reverence for this procession of peace.

By contrast, Holy week, which is where we go tomorrow,
Is another story. One fraught with *fear, sadness, betrayal, loyalty,*
humiliation, mystery, anger, pain, ambivalence, and eventually death.

At the beginning of holy week, as recorded in the gospel of Mark
Jesus introduces in Jerusalem the same radical message of equality he has
preached in the villages. He demonstrates in the temple. He speaks in
parables. He astutely and straightforwardly critiques
the political and social order. He is interrogated by the authorities. An
unspeakable doom is in the air. His relationships with those who love him
Are tense and marked by sadness and fear. There is suspicion and doubt.
On Thursday, Jesus has his sober and mysterious Passover Supper with his
disciples. On Friday, he is arrested, and mocked and humiliated as he carries
his cross To Golgotha where he is crucified.
And on Saturday, the world is silent and shrouded
In breathless shock and grief.

But we need this whole pattern of rising and falling, says
Peter Gomes, minister of the Harvard University chapel.
Gomes says we in the churches have too often gone straight from the victory
of Palm Sunday to the glory of Easter
And miss some of the most important pinnacle moments of Jesus life
Which lie in this tumultuous and mystical week between.
He says we have turned Palm Sunday into a dress rehearsal for Easter.

Gomes is of the school of thought that we should commemorate this day not
only as Palm Sunday, but *Passion* Sunday, so that we don't ignore the
unpleasant prospect of the cross, don't skip over all of what is to come
because it is hard to confront. The Latin root of passion is *passio*, and it
means experience or suffering, and its impact.

As we know, passion can also mean heightened feeling.
It certainly describes when Jesus is at his most
controversial, most passionate, most cryptic, and most human...

Gomes feels that this glossing over of holy week is typical of our culture, which chooses *shallow optimism over real hope*....

We prefer to leave the Palm Sunday service blithely looking forward to Easter.

Genuine hope is not the same as optimism, the assumption that everything will be fine...It does not ignore the realities...

But rather *genuine* hope, says Gomes, is forged on the anvil of adversity. It is a rugged, muscular hope.... and it needs to be stretched and flexed... muscles only work when you have had to use them...

So friends, isn't this just like our lives?

This is not so much about whether we mediate and pray on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and follow scripture through the liturgical events of the week that it is to come.

It is more about how we make our hope strong enough to carry us through hard, hopeless times.

For it is not holy week alone that brings us from Righteous suffering to the resurrection

And it is not Palm Sunday alone that leads immediately to Easter.

It is not Palm Sunday alone that gives way to the disappointment of defeat and betrayal that follows it.

Rather, we move from the palms of victory to disappointments and defeats And back again. It is a roller coaster perhaps,

But it is more like the true story of what it means to be human.

Is more like an exercise in genuine hope.

Many of you hear stories of children in the inner cities who have very little resources and guidance to send them forward. You hear of one poem noticed by that one special teacher, and published in the school newspaper, the basketball tournament won by a final shot.

You hear of the one victory

That stays with a child throughout their life.

Mountain climber Rene Dumal says, we do not stay on the summit forever, you have to come down again—but you do not ask yourself why you bothered going, for there is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what you say higher up... Because when one can no longer see, one can at least still know.

God dares us to bring down and away with us that sense of hope and possibility we have had when we have been happy, victorious. For that is

what sustains us in the lower regions, the regions where much of life really happens.

And thus of the meaning of Palm Sunday in the context of the wild and sad and frightening and mysterious and alienating and amazing and trying and tragic weeks events of the next week, the events down below--. Jesus and his disciples had processed in to Jerusalem in a counterdemonstration, reclaimed the holy city, wrested it, even if symbolically, and for a few moments, from the imperial powers that had colonized and corrupted it.

Branches from trees were used to welcome them instead of expensive carpets, joy and revelry replaced pomp and circumstance.

Indeed the procession of the palms is thought of in scripture as a fulfillment of prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures:

*See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

This was a victory of hope. This hope does not look back and say, we marched *here* to come to *this*? No, it remembers the special secret of the victory and keeps on going. *Real Hope, Peter Gomes says, is the stuff that gets us through and beyond when the worst that can happen happens.*

And indeed, in the days that follow, the worst happens to Jesus...

So today as we celebrate and wave our palm braches in joy and pride, we move with the memory of this special day and with the courage it gives us into the fear and sadness of Holy Week.

For Holy *Week* is like a picture of what the *years* of real life are really like.

Compared to Pilate's entourage *our* victories too might seems small and shabby, and once we have arrived victoriously somewhere we might find that there are more hurdles yet to come than we could have ever imagined.

And yet Palm Sunday calls us to march forward, even if it is straight into and through the mountains and valleys of ambivalence, betrayal, uncertainty, and humiliation.

And the secret is when we are trudging with our crosses to remember and cherish and believe in our victories, even, and *especially those that are simple, counter cultural, and deeply self-respecting.*

Those that at first might seem trite or small or even ridiculous—like riding a donkey—in the eyes of the world. Even if the victories were at first heralded with branches and peoples old coats.

So let us not skip to the celebration of Easter without going through holy week, for this is not about an immediate optimistic victory of peace over strife or tranquility over anguish. *It is about the internalization of hope...*

Towards the end of the long last week of his life, the Thursday after today's Sunday, Jesus gathered with his disciples to share the Passover meal.

This is a meal that commemorates the Jewish people's liberation from *another* previous empire that oppressed them-- Egypt. Jews had the Passover festival then as they do now every year to remember and celebrate and bring forward with them the victory of going from bondage to liberation.

So as you participate in that very ceremony, as it became for followers of Jesus the *Last Supper*

May you move from Palms through the Passion to Possibility.

Remember your joys and victories, for they are your food for the journey...

Pave the road of your life—mountainous and treacherous and with deep valleys and caverns though it might be-- with branches you can find from anywhere singing

Hosanna in the highest

Blessed is the one who came in the name of God.

Amen.