

FROM ALLELUIAS TO ASHES ...

Sermon, April 14, 2019

Palm/Passion Sunday

What's happening in Jerusalem? The whole city was in an uproar, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people lining the streets. These crowds had too long chafed under the despotic control of a despised occupying power, they had too long been under the boot of the oppressor, and now they gather in tight to catch a glimpse of their Deliverer, their savior. Their emotions were at a high pitch as they lay their cloaks on the street and wave palm branches and burst into shouts of alleluias and hosannas as their Deliverer, their savior, approaches. "*Alleluia! Hosannah! Blessed is he who overcomes in the name of the Lord. Hosannah, JUDAS!*" That's right, **Judas** ... your pastor isn't having a senior moment. The scene I just described is from the year 164 B.C.; the Deliverer being hailed and hosannahed by THIS crowd is **Judas Maccabee**, along with his rebel army of Maccabeans, parading up to the city gates and then through the streets of Jerusalem.

To better understand the passionate background of Passion Sunday, it helps to understand the passionate background of another holiday of the Jewish people, the holiday of Hanukkah. Almost two hundred years prior to Jesus' triumphal entry, the Greek-Syrian Empire known as the Seleucids¹ (established after the death of Alexander the Great) had Israel under its heel. The current ruler of that empire, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, ruthlessly imposed Greek customs, Greek culture and Greek religion on the Israelites. Pagan altars to Hellenistic gods were erected all over the countryside; I'm told a statue of Zeus was even set up on the altar in the Temple, the holiest place of Judaism. Observance of the Sabbath was strictly forbidden. Thousands of faithful Jews who resisted were simply executed, murdered. Jewish priests were forced to perform sacrilegious acts, even in the Temple. One aging priest, Mattathias, refused to obey an order from a royal official to sacrifice a pig to Zeus on this altar in the Temple. Instead, in an act of desperation, Mattathias "sacrificed" the royal official, and then the faithful old priest and his sons fled to the hillsides. One of Mattathias' sons, Judas, organized and commanded a ragtag rebel force into an army of about three thousand men; for three years they conducted guerilla warfare against the **fifty** thousand man army of Antiochus. Judas became known as Judas "Maccabee," or Judas the **Hammer** ... and his army became known as the Maccabeans ... for the hammer-like hard, quick, sudden and deadly lethal blows delivered against the occupying forces. Three years later, in the year 164 B.C., this ragtag army of three thousand eventually routed the **fifty** thousand Syrian-Greek army of Antiochus IV.

One of the very first things the Maccabeans did after routing the occupying army was to march to the Temple and cleanse it. They pulverized the statue of Zeus, they overturned and removed the pagan altars to lesser Hellenistic gods, and they generally purged all the despicable pagan symbols from this holy place. They then relit the holy lamp, the Menorah, which had gone out ... the lamp only had enough oil for one day, but it miraculously remained lit for eight days, just long enough to properly prepare new oil. The Temple was officially re-dedicated; the word Hanukkah means "dedication." After the dedication of the Temple, Judas Maccabee and the Maccabean army marched triumphantly through the streets of Jerusalem, and the people came out waving palm branches. The people sang "Hosannahs" (*which can be roughly translated as "Save us now!" or "Salvation is now!"*), cheered "Alleluias" and frantically waved their palm branches hailing these deliverers who expelled the hated occupying forces of the Seleucid empire.

A little less than two centuries years later, Israel is again an occupied country. This time it is not the Seleucids; it's the Romans. Also, it is Passover ... which is the holiday that commemorates the Jew's release from yet another oppressive empire, Egypt. Nationalistic passions are running high as another heroic figure, one who has been creating quite a stir in the countryside and a man rumored to be the hoped-for Messiah, is now riding down the hill from the Mount of Olives and heading up toward the Eastern Gate on a donkey. This is just as the prophets foretold! The people were ecstatic ... just as in 164 B.C., the people got out the palm branches and lined the streets! I'm sure their hopes and anticipations were running all the higher the next day, for the day after His triumphal entry, Jesus entered the Temple, overturned the tables of the moneychangers, and drove them out with a whip. He *cleansed the Temple*, like the Macabbeans two centuries earlier! It seemed as if history were repeating itself! So, out came the palms! "Hosannah, Alleluia!"

Now, hold that thought a moment.

The dictionary defines the word *fragrant* as "*Having a pleasant odor.*" The dictionary defines the word *flagrant* as "*Conspicuously bad, offensive, or reprehensible, so offensive that it cannot escape notice.*" There's a fine line of distinction between the two, which is highlighted by the fact that only one letter can totally change the meaning of the word! *Fragrant* can easily become *flagrant* ... as anyone who has been overpowered by a bad aftershave or strong perfume can attest. The day before Palm Sunday in 2015 (*March 28 to be exact*) the **Huffington Post** told of a church near

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seleucid_Empire

Seattle advertising "FRAGRANCE-FREE PEWS." These seats are reserved for those who wish to worship in a fragrance-free environment; there are people who suffer allergies, asthma or other respiratory and/or related digestive ailments who cannot tolerate being close to people wearing perfume or cologne. To such people the *fragrant* is *flagrant*. In fact, I've noticed something of a heightened sensitivity in this area myself as I've aged. Fragrance from colognes, perfumes and even flowers adversely affects my sinuses and stomach much more so than it did when I was younger. I mean, I can still remember in my junior high days when my two brothers and I were getting ready for a dance at our local swim club and we concocted our own cologne by mixing together Hai Karate, Jade East, English Leather and Old Spice ... you know, all of the top of the line fine fragrances of the day ... and we called it our Love Potion #9. I'm sure people knew the Clarks were on the way to the dance while we were still a mile or so away. Now, though, such **fragrance** would be intolerably **flagrant** to my senses.

Another example of *fragrant* to *flagrant*: When a wine "turns," the wine's aromatic, fragrant bouquet turns into the biting, flagrant stench of vinegar. Well, the original Holy Week was like that. Holy Week was full of *fragrant* devotion turning into *flagrant* and bitter disappointment. We will go from "*Hosannah!*" on Sunday to "*Crucify him!*" on Friday, from "*Alleluia, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*" to the sneering, "*He saved others; let him save himself!*" In just five days we will go from "alleluias" to "ashes" ... the joyful alleluias of Palm Sunday disintegrate into the ashes of death Good Friday. And we especially see this fragrant turn to flagrant in the disciple Judas Iscariot.

It is quite possible Judas Macabbee, this national heroic figure of an indomitable fighting man, was the namesake of Judas Iscariot. Perhaps Judas' parents hoped their boy would grow up to emulate this national hero of Hanukkah. "Iscariot" most likely refers to Judas' place of origin: "Ish" is the Aramaic word for "man," and "Kerioth" most likely refers to a little town south of Hebron. He was Judas "*Ish-Kerioth*;" Judas, a "man from Kerioth;" the only disciple who wasn't a Galilean. It is quite possible Judas Iscariot, like Judas Macabbee, was an intensely patriotic man who dreamed to see his country freed from the oppressor. And it is quite possible Judas Iscariot believed Jesus would make that dream come true. After all, Judas, along with the other disciples, had witnessed first hand Jesus' miracles, he had often seen huge crowds moved by Jesus' stirring words, and he'd even seen Jesus raise a man from the dead! Judas wasn't an obvious villain from the beginning. Like many of you here this morning, he was most likely a man of high ideals, or he never would have accepted the call of Jesus to be a disciple in the first place. And we do know that the other disciples considered him trustworthy enough to make him their treasurer.

So ... why did Judas betray? Perhaps, to this man who is most likely named after a fighting man of action, Jesus was strangely and inexplicably slow to act. And Jesus kept talking about allowing Himself to be turned over, about His impending death; to Judas, Jesus was acting less and less like a liberator and more and more like a defeatist. Yes, Judas believed in Jesus. Yes, Judas believed Jesus was powerful enough to save and deliver. Yes, Judas was willing to follow Jesus ... *to a certain point*. But to Judas, this isn't what a liberator was supposed to do! This isn't how a Deliverer was supposed to act! So, some speculate, Judas designed a strategy to *compel* Jesus to act as He should! Perhaps he wished to force Jesus' hand, to compel Jesus to unleash His power. When Judas gave Jesus that infamous kiss, maybe there was a fire of challenge and excitement in his eyes. Perhaps his unrecorded words were, "*Hosannah! Salvation is now! Save us, NOW! Now, you must act. Do your stuff!*"

But when Judas realized his misdirected devotion had only made matters worse ... and this is a sermon in itself, but misdirected devotion that is not in accord with the expressed will of Jesus *always* serves to make matters worse ... when Judas realized his misdirected devotion only led to the apparent destruction of his hope and left his dreams in ashes, he went out and hanged himself. The tragedy of Judas was that he did not accept Jesus Christ on Jesus Christ's terms. He sought to make Jesus Christ into what he wanted him to be. And when Jesus didn't do battle on Judas' terms, he turned. The sweet bouquet of his devotion became the bitter vinegar of betrayal. This was also the tragedy of the many in that Palm Sunday crowd. When Jesus did not do what *they* wanted, when Jesus did not live up to *their* expectations, when He did not act as they thought He should act, they turned.

Judas and the crowd just did not understand that the Messiah *was* coming to town to fight, and that He *would* win a decisive victory. But the battle to be fought was not against the Romans. Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to fight the battle for our souls. On the back of a donkey He was storming the gates of Hell, and He was going to prevail; He was coming to conquer sin and death with finality. But it had to be done His way, not Judas' way. Not the crowd's way. As we know from the vantage point of faith and history, Jesus would go on to win a decisive and eternal victory. Next Sunday this sanctuary won't be a fragrance free zone; it will be filled with the fragrance of Easter lilies and spring flowers (*I know that's hard for those of us with allergies and/or sensitivities; sorry, we'll have to deal with it*), the fragrance of life. Fragrance that reminds us the Messiah has indeed fought the fight, the battle won; the fragrant aroma of life overcoming the flagrant stench of sin and death.

Most of all, the fragrance reminds us of Christ who loved us and "... gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and pleasing sacrifice to God." (*Ephesians 5:1-2*) A fragrance that calls us, too, to gratefully offer our lives as fragrant offerings, pleasing to God, out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for us.