

## NOT YOUR BATTLE, PART II

### Palm/Passion Sunday, April 5, 2020

#### Texts: Selected Readings

Today is the first day of Holy Week. This the first and only Holy Week in the entire history of our nation that the churches across our land are closed; this extreme national shutdown is unprecedented in so many ways ... and here we are, preparing to commemorate this holiest of weeks via the internet from an empty sanctuary.

Today is Palm Sunday, or as some traditions prefer to call it, Passion Sunday. What a spectrum of emotions takes place in the course of this week. We will go from "Hallelujah! Hosannah!" on Sunday to "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" on Friday. We will go from the exuberant "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," to the scoffing and jeering "He saved others; let Him save Himself!" We will go from Jesus' triumphal entry, with the waving of palms and the welcoming shouts of the crowd and the delightful cries of children, to hoots of derision and loud demands for Jesus' crucifixion and death. Something I like to say just about every Palm Sunday is please don't go from the "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday directly to the "Hallelujahs" of Easter, and completely miss marking and commemorating and contemplating what takes place in between ... the events that are at the core of the Christian gospel, the events of Jesus' passion (that, by the way, is a plug for you to "attend" the online services of worship being planned this week Maundy Thursday and Good Friday!). Why "passion;" why is that word used? We normally associate the word with intense emotion and feeling, an intensity which can be positive or negative. Our English word "passion" comes from a Greek root word which specifically means to suffer, to undergo or experience difficulty. But it is appropriate to use "passion" in the broader and emotional English sense as well, because God's passion is on display in the Passion! God's passionate love for His people is at work. Jesus' suffering ... His Passion ... was born of *divine* passion. It was born out of God's *passionate* love for you and for me.

And Holy Week begins with intensely passionate crowds. Jesus had just left the village of Bethany and was coming down from the Mount of Olives, by the Garden of Gethsemane, on the way to the Golden Gate which was the gate through which the Messiah was expected to enter Jerusalem, a distance roughly approximate to the distance between here and the R.I. Community College. This triumphal procession was accompanied by shouting and singing from the crowds of people lining the roadside along the way, people who had been gathering from the outlying villages for a glimpse of this rabbi from Galilee, this miracle-worker who had reportedly raised a man from the dead, this man rumored to be the Messiah. Perhaps in that crowd was the former blind man, the one who had his sight restored. Perhaps in the crowd was the woman caught in adultery, the one who had her dignity and sense of self-worth restored. Perhaps in the crowd was Zaccheus, the little tree-climbing tax collector from Jericho, the one who had his public honor and his integrity restored. Perhaps in the crowd was Lazarus, the one who had his very *life* restored ... all by the grace of Jesus Christ, the central figure in this parade. The crowd certainly included hungry people Jesus had fed, sick people Jesus had healed, despairing people to whom Jesus had given hope.

On the lips of the passionate crowd as Jesus rode up the hill into the city on that donkey were the words, "Hosannah! (which means, "Save us now!") Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the LORD!" You have to appreciate this was a politically charged event, as well. The palm branch was something of a nationalistic symbol, almost like a Jewish flag, and these people waving these branches so dear to their faith and their heritage are doing so defiantly in full view of the Romans who had strictly forbidden such displays of patriotic faithfulness. No doubt about it, Jesus deliberately chose to make this boldly public entry into Jerusalem. For Jesus, it was the end of all privacy, anonymity and safety, and the beginning of what would be an inevitable collision course with the political and priestly authorities. This step was taken deliberately, with every consideration for the consequences, otherwise He and the disciples could have simply slipped in quietly and unceremoniously into the city along with the thousands of Passover pilgrims. We may have been a bit hard on the disciples over the centuries, but let us not underestimate and/or under-appreciate their courage in accompanying Jesus here. These bold and courageous men were all taking a tremendous risk, and they knew it.

"Hosanna to the Son of David!" they cried. Again, this is a politically charged atmosphere; David was the greatest king of Israelite history, and his descendant Jesus has finally come to this capital city established by David. **Now** it was time for the Kingdom of God. **Now** it was time for things to start changing. **Now** it was time for some things to be set right in the world. What the crowd just did not understand was 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; this was the Lord's battle, only He could fight it. He was coming to conquer sin and death with finality. But it had to be done the Lord's 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, eternal victory. Next week churches around the world will gather to sing (sadly, on line) that grand hymn of Charles Wesley, "**Christ the Lord is Risen Today.**" "Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won; Alleluia! Death in vain forbids him rise, Christ has opened Paradise."

Last week we looked at II Chronicles 20, I'd like to give a quick summation and add some related thoughts: After David's son Solomon died, the Hebrews suffered under a succession of failed kings who led the nation into civil war, economic depression, the perversion of justice, military humiliation, and a sense of social malaise. Then, in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century BC, Jehoshaphat became king. He was convinced his nation's problems were primarily spiritual, so he reintroduced his people to the Scriptures; in the third year of his reign he sent a number of officials and priests to all the towns in Judah; II Chron. 17:9, "...taking with them the Book of the Law of the Lord: they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people." When they returned to their holy texts, the Hebrews rediscovered the great dreams God had given them long ago. Dreams God gave to Abraham that gave him such a sense of mission and purpose, which was that he was blessed in order to be a blessing. Dreams God gave to Moses and his people to live in freedom and **never to lose that freedom again**, supplying them with laws and statutes that would help them keep their freedom. Dreams God gave to David and Solomon to be a holy kingdom, in which the people honored God not only with their lips but in all of their social and economic relationships as well. These were great dreams, dreams of what God can do through those who worship Him. They are also dreams we in the church has inherited - dreams that tell us who we are, why we are here, what we are to be about in life. We, too, have been blessed in order to be a blessing; we, too, are given freedom and instructed by God in his good law how to stay free and enjoy life to the full, and we, too, are to honor God not only with our lips but in all of our social and economic and familial relationships. And we come here to worship to rehearse these dreams, to renew our identity as a people whose lives are formed by such visions; in short, we come here to rehearse how to live by faithful service to the true King.

Chapter 20 begins by telling us that after Jehoshaphat had finally led the people into all of this spiritual and social renewal, things were going well ... the country prospered, the "rock market" was rising ... it was a good time to be alive. And suddenly, the kingdom was faced with a deadly challenge. A messenger came running up to the king saying, "*The Moabites, Ammonites, the Meunites are marching this way... a vast army, a huge multitude, is coming against you.*" We are told that after Jehoshaphat heard this, he became afraid. The king knew the limitations of his tiny nation; he knew the odds were against him. We are told Jehoshaphat brought his fear to worship. Worship, where we focus not on what's wrong, but on what's right. Worship, we we focus not on the enemy, not on our limitations, but on God. Worship is the place where we stand before the Lord, to listen and watch for God's word to us. The Lord responded to Jehoshaphat, "*Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's.*" He goes on to tell him to go boldly out to meet this army, but adds, "*you will not have to fight this battle. Go out and face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you!*" They rose early in the morning and went out to meet this vast army: and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "*Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld.*" And I love what he did next: Jehoshaphat appointed something of a choir to lead them into battle!

So the Hebrews head off into battle, with the choir leading the charge! (*It is good to have the choir lead the charge as we go out into our world! There is a sermon in itself here, but there is much comfort, encouragement and inspiration that comes from singing the grand hymns of God together! Join us Wednesday night; we've been holding weekly hymn sings via Facebook that have been so refreshing and well received by many, especially during this time of isolation. If I'm to go fight a battle, I want John and Olivia Black leading the charge!*) As they marched forward in faith singing God's praises, we are told the Lord set some sort of an ambush; some speculate it may have even been an angelic ambush. And soon these enemies of the Hebrews began fighting with each other; in fact, we are told they destroyed each other before the Hebrews even got there! Who would have thought Jehoshaphat's little choir-led army would survive against so vast and deadly an enemy?

They marched out in faith, living by faith. They marched out singing an anthem of faith, and trusting the Lord's promise that the battle is His! *Let us join together in the responsive prayer that is found in your bulletins.*

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Adapted from the Book of Common Worship, c. 1993,

"Our Redeemer suffered death, was buried & rose again for our sake."

Christ our Teacher, for us You were obedient, even unto death:

**SO TEACH US TO OBEY GOD'S WILL IN ALL THINGS.**

Christ our Life, by Your death and resurrection You destroyed the power of sin and death:

**ENABLE US TO DIE WITH YOU, AND TO RISE WITH YOU IN GLORY.**

Christ our Strength, You were despised, rejected and humiliated as a condemned criminal:

**TEACH US THE HUMILITY BY WHICH YOU SAVED US.**

Christ our Salvation, You gave Your life out of love for us:

**SO HELP US TO LOVE YOU AND TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.**

Christ our Savior, on the cross You embraced all time with Your outstretched arms:

**GATHER THE SCATTERED CHILDREN OF GOD OF EVERY TIME AND EVERY PLACE INTO YOUR KINGDOM.**

Jesus, Lamb of God,

**HAVE MERCY ON US.**

Jesus, Bearer of our sins,

**HAVE MERCY ON US.**

Jesus, Redeemer of the world,

**GRANT US THY PEACE.**

Eternal God: as we are baptized into Jesus' death, so give us the grace of repentance that we may pass through the grave with Him and be born again to life abundant and eternal. For He is the One who was crucified, dead, and buried, and rose again for us, Jesus our Savior, who taught us to pray, "OUR FATHER ... "