

March 20, 2016  
Palm Sunday



***The God We Can Know:  
“The Tears of Our Lord”***

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Birmingham, Michigan  
Scripture: Luke 13:31-35

*At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”*

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

A photographer for a national magazine was assigned to take some photos of a forest fire. He had made arrangements with an airport near the fire zone to hire an airplane. He was told a plane would be waiting for him at the airport.

When he arrived at the airport, a plane was warming up near the runway. He jumped in with his equipment and yelled, “Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go!” The pilot swung the plane into the air.

“Fly over the north side of the fire,” yelled the photographer, “and make three or four low level passes.”

“Why?” asked the pilot.

“Because I’m going to take pictures,” cried the photographer. “I’m a photographer and photographers take pictures!”

After a pause, the pilot said, “You mean you’re not the instructor?”

Sometimes people completely surprise us! We should have no illusions about what Jesus did on Palm Sunday. Jesus completely shocked his followers when he left the tranquility of beautiful rural Galilee and headed for the tinder-box of Jerusalem. It was the Passover, the celebration of

the Jews' liberation from Egypt, and what Jerusalem wanted more than anything was a hero to liberate them from the dominion of Rome. By going to Jerusalem, Jesus knew he was going to excite expectations that he was that Messiah, the one who would rally his people militarily to defeat the Romans. His disciples really must have been in shock and shaken down to their sandals.

Naturally, it is a great story. We just love that picture of the Palm Sunday parade into the city! Although he had been to Jerusalem before, Jesus' ministry was primarily to the north in Galilee. But Jesus didn't head to a quiet retreat center or monastery; he did not choose to stay in the relative comfort and security of Galilee, his home turf. Instead he intentionally leads his disciples – and us – into a life of radical involvement in the world. And here's the thing: he could have stayed in Galilee and avoided the risks of the city, lived comfortably and safely. He could have continued working as a carpenter or stone worker, serving in the synagogue as a resourceful rabbi. The decision to go to Jerusalem in itself is significant for what it says about how we are to live a faithful life. I hope we don't miss this.

Here is the crux of the tension that is built into our Palm Sunday observances. I love a parade. We all love a parade. We love the image of Jesus being welcomed into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. We love that people throw down palm branches and their cloaks to welcome him and shout "Hosanna!" as they would for a king or conquering general. We love that his very appearance in Jerusalem throws the Jewish Sanhedrin and the Roman Governor into crisis. But then everything changes. The cheers turn into jeers at Jesus. Among his triumphant Palm Sunday disciples, men who had been with him through thick and thin – like Peter, James and John, and even Judas – one betrays him, one denies knowing him, and the others hide like cowards. The triumphant Messiah we celebrate today is brought before Pontius Pilate who places his fate in the hands of those adoring crowds, who swiftly choose to crucify him. He is stripped, painfully scourged, nailed to a cross and dies.

How swiftly the change comes. From parade cheers to condemnation and scourging, to tears and crucifixion. All of this happens within days and it causes our heads to spin. We're left wondering what exactly we're celebrating today when everything changes tomorrow. I know preachers who won't even touch the Palm Sunday story because it's so misleading. It's so triumphal and victorious. And so many of their people miss the heart of this week, oblivious to the betrayal of Maundy Thursday and the crucifixion of Good Friday. It's so tempting to go from the celebration of Palm Sunday to the celebration of Easter as if all that comes between never happened.

Fleming Rutledge, in her book *The Undoing of Death*, tells about a sign in the window of a greeting card shop: "We make Easter easy. One-stop shopping for all the eggs, flowers, cards and bunnies you might need." That's exactly how we prefer it, Rutledge comments. Christianity without a cross; Easter without the messiness of Good Friday. Bishop William Willimon remembers when the people of his first small congregation put a large rough cross on the church lawn in Lent and the neighbors complained because it was ugly and unsightly. When Willimon was the chaplain at Duke University, he said he's always been tempted on the day before Easter to put a sign out in front of the Duke Chapel: "No one gets in who wasn't here on Friday."

And nowhere is the poignancy of this reversal seen more clearly than when Jesus, on his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, stops half-way down the Mount of Olives and weeps. He weeps over Jerusalem. It's a strong word, describing the brokenhearted sobbing of people at a funeral. This is one of only two places in the gospels where Jesus's very human side is clear for all to see. He knows that the people are looking for a reason to fight Rome, and he weeps. Coming down the Mount of Olives he said, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies...will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." And knowing that this would happen, he wept.

Earlier in his ministry Jesus said the strangest thing. It's commemorated in a small chapel on the Palm Sunday route because it also is a lament over Jerusalem. While still in Galilee, he called Herod a fox. "Tell that fox for me that I am casting out demons, performing cures, today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." And then the poignant lament: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. How often I have desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing." A fox and a hen. What an interesting pair of images. I've read that passage all my life and never before noticed. Fox and hen: one is crafty, fierce, predator; the other is vulnerable, weak, full of maternal love. It's all packed together in two sentences.

They've built this tiny chapel on the Mount of Olives. If it's not on our itinerary when we lead a tour group there, we make sure it's added on. We stopped there just over a year ago with a group from our church. It's likely close to where Jesus stopped. The chapel is called Dominus Fleuit, "Our Lord Wept," and Laurie and I have been there many times. It's actually built in the shape of a tear drop. However, I – and many others – didn't really notice what was there. Many of you know and have read the books of Barbara Brown Taylor. Barbara points out what I was too blind to see. It came into focus for her on a trip to the Holy Land at this little chapel. In the wall behind the altar there is a window through which you can see a splendid view of the city. And on the front of the altar is the image of a rooster, "a bright, fierce-looking bird made out of colored tiles with a flock of little chicks under his wing." "A rooster?" Barbara asks, "Jesus didn't say rooster. He said hen."

Once again, Jesus shocks us. I should have seen this. I grew up with chickens in my childhood and I learned to keep away from roosters. A rooster is no gentle hen. He can defend himself. He can attack aggressively with sharp spikes in the back of his feet and with pointed beak. He is fast and agile and for thousands of years, people have trained roosters to fight to the death – for their entertainment and betting pleasure. But Jesus didn't say rooster. And so Jesus gives us an entirely new way to see and understand God. And it's a foreshadowing of what will happen on Good Friday.

Here's how Dr. Taylor describes it: "Jesus likened himself to a brooding hen whose chief purpose in life is to protect her young. She doesn't have talons or much of a beak. All she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks. She can also put herself between them and the fox, as ill equipped as she is. She can only hope that she satisfies his appetite so that he leaves her babies alone. How do you like that image of God?" Dr. Taylor asks.<sup>1</sup> This is the God Jesus teaches us to know.

The crowd cheers. Jesus weeps. This picture highlights the emotional reality of Christ's heart. He had no illusions about the parade, knowing that soon he would go to a cross for the city over which he wept. So when we look under the surface of our Palm Sunday parade, we find that there's a very hard reality awaiting underneath. And we don't want to see that reality.

There is no day quite like this one in terms of the collision of God and earthly empires. "Jesus has disciples. Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves. Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies. Herod kills his. In a contest between a fox and a chicken, whom would you bet on?"<sup>2</sup> Two centuries later, who would have bet on the Christians when they huddled in the middle of Circus Maximus with 100,000 screaming citizens of Rome wanting their martyrdom?

A thousand years later, in Scotland, who would have bet on the monks when the Vikings invaded and raped and killed everyone?

In Nazi Germany, who would have bet on a reserved German pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer instead of the regime that called itself "The Thousand Year Reich"? Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who could have safely stayed teaching in the United States but felt compelled to return to Germany to oppose the Nazis. He was imprisoned, then hung days before his prison camp was liberated, but his writings from prison have changed the lives of countless people. You can't kill enough Christians in Rome to overcome the strange power of love. The fox and the hen – the strange power of love; and it is the job of Christians to live faithfully in a world that will always bet on love.

There is no other day like this one. But not because Jesus is leading a parade. This is the day when he decides to live thoroughly in the world, to go to the city, the very heart of his nation. This is the day when he shows us that to seek God's will does not mean staying in the safety of the Galilean hillsides but to enter the city streets. On this day he shows us that following God is not always in the quiet of personal prayer and study and meditation, but in the messy, dangerous ambiguity of the human community, the city. This is the day where Jesus shows us how to live courageously for the love of God.

And so on this Palm Sunday, where will you be in the parade?

Will we fall in behind our Lord as he bravely enters the city? Will we follow his example of how human life is to be lived, in courage and integrity and commitment? Or will we be passive observers, as he lives out his life fully by giving it away, holding nothing back?

Will we join him as he bids you and me, his church, to leave the ease of the Galilee and follow into the risky world of politics and economics – that is to say, into the world, this world, in his name? Will we truly follow as he leads us to serve our neighbors in his name: the poor, the marginalized, and those we can't seem to figure out how to educate and house and medically care for? Will we follow as this mother hen leads us into the world he so passionately loved?

And will we follow in reverence and wonder as he goes on ahead of us, as he shows us how to do it – how to live and passionately love, and how to die? How will you join in the parade – with the cheers, the jeers...or with the tears?

May we pray?

Gracious God, we love the joy of a parade and we all love being triumphant. But the path of true life, which you embodied for us, shows us that true life is found in setting our faces toward our Jerusalem, not taking the easy way, combating the evils of the world, and in sacrificially giving our lives for others. Help us not to jump ahead to Easter, rather let us walk by your side through the holy week to come. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> *Bread of Angels*, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Bread of Angels*, p. 124.