

St James United Church

Message for April 2, 2023

Palm and Passion Sunday

“From Palms to Passion”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 12:12-18



Through these weeks we've pondered what it means to share in Jesus' identity and life as a disciple and today we embodied that somewhat as we waved palms and processed around the sanctuary. And yet I'm left wondering if I'm missing something about what it means to truly follow him. After all, each year as we sing "All Glory, Laud and Honour" and recreate Jesus' arrival to Jerusalem, I feel a rush, a sense of expectation and joy, in that moment brought back to the rush, to the expectation and joy that people must have felt when they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, believing that Jesus had come to bring victory over the Romans, especially as John tells it, Jesus' reputation boosted by those who saw Lazarus raised.

As we walk, I imagine I'm in the crowd hoping, wondering, "Is he the promised one, coming to Jerusalem like this in the lead up to Passover?" I wonder if this is the time that God will set us free again, and not just as God did all those generations ago, freeing us from enslavement in Egypt, but when God called Judah Maccabee, Judah the Hammer, to free our ancestors from the oppressive power of the Greeks? Isn't this why everyone has palm fronds? In memory of his kingship, waving the symbol of their independence until the Romans came? Maybe Jesus is a new king, especially a king backed by divine power?

But then I notice something unexpected. As Jesus rounds the corner, he isn't on a war horse, but e's on a donkey. In that moment I realize for sure that I must be missing something but as I see him I feel deflated. I was expecting him to mirror another procession that is happening on the other side of the city, the Roman Governor entering Jerusalem in a show of power, riding a war horse as he leads a full legion of the imperial army. He's come to keep us in check, to remind us that now is not the time to crown a new king. From the looks of things they have the full backing of divine power. Isn't the emperor a son of the gods? How is Jesus going to usher in a kingdom on a donkey? Maybe I don't understand what God's kingdom is about?

That question is the crux of sharing in Jesus' life. That's what I'm missing in the rush of waving palms. As his disciples we are called on to emulate him, and yet as I consider what will happen in the coming days, I pause. I realize that I am much more impressed by the way of the war horse than that of a humble donkey. Jesus' arrival on one seems to bring the opposite of the victory I so craved as we processed around the sanctuary, not victory and triumph at the

Eastern Gate but instead agony and defeat on Calvary's Hill. It's a path of humiliation and seeming abandonment. Where's the divine power? It feels absent on the cross. Perhaps that divine power is with Rome after all, still with it all these centuries later? Our still very violent and decidedly stratified world would suggest that we believe that, that in spite of all our claims otherwise, we still prefer to wave palm branches than to embrace the self-sacrifice of the cross.

And so each year we are confronted as we will be in a few moments with what unbridled power looks like, what happens when Pontius Pilate and others like him are left unchecked. And each year we are reminded what a true king looks like, one who empties himself of all power in order to lift everyone up, who embraces the passion of the cross, and so creates for us a passage into a world where we embrace the core meaning of Passover, not just being set free but releasing each other from bondage in order to form a new community where we're connected in compassion and share with one another. We think the war horse means bravery, but true courage comes not in waving palm branches but the passion of the cross.

I'd like to close with a poem by Mary Oliver:

"The Poet Thinks of the Donkey"

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,
leap with delight!...*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.

May we be as brave as the donkey, and brave as the one who rode so lightly upon him, brave to go beyond just waving palms to follow him through the Eastern Gate to Calvary's Hill. Amen.