

Palm Sunday - year C  
Luke 19:28-40; 22:14-23:56  
March 20, 2016

*And the people stood by, watching.*

The Passion Gospel is the core narrative of our faith. It shapes the Triduum of Holy Week, the three day celebration which begins here at Christ Church on Thursday, with 6 pm supper in the Parish Hall. During the three days, the story of Jesus moves from the Passover meal to betrayal, condemnation, crucifixion, and then, on Saturday evening at the Vigil, to Easter Resurrection. Gone are the stories of miracles and healing. The mysterious acts that unfold carry us beyond the wise teacher straight into the heart of our faith, Jesus' sacrifice for us and redemptive love.

The Passion Gospel unfolds in a series of scenes, so today I would like to call up mental images of the places where Jesus walked. Consider the people who appear in each place. Do we see aspects of ourselves, of our human nature, of incidents familiar from our own experience? How do you connect his journey with yours, and with those who are struggling now in the war torn lands of the Middle East?

*After throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully....blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.*

The Mount of Olives – actually a high ridge to the east of Jerusalem – rises one hundred feet higher than Jerusalem, or 2,700 feet above sea level. Between the two heights of Jerusalem and the Mt of Olives, the Kidron Valley stretches far into the distance to the Dead Sea; at the bottom of the valley, the Kidron River separates the Temple Mount from the Mt. of Olives. The steep valley slopes are covered with burial caves and bone boxes (ossuaries), many dating from before the time of Jesus. The graves now are Jewish, Christian, Arab – each group segregated in vast layers lining the routes down from the Mount and back up to Jerusalem, right up to the Golden or Eastern gate to the city. In the first century, there were undoubtedly fewer boxes, but the hillsides were likely just as dusty and barren.

There are three possible 'palm Sunday trails' from the Mt. of Olives, down to the Garden of Gethsemane near the River. Each trail starts near Bethany, where Jesus' friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus all lived. .

The trail I walked two years ago is steep, narrow – a winding, cobbled roadway. Across the Valley, the old City of Jerusalem glistened in the brilliant sunshine – while death hovered around the ancient burial boxes. Street hawkers were determined to sell us scarves, bracelets, postcards – we pushed past them, for according to their custom, if you pause to touch the items, you purchase them. I imagine the trail felt something like that on Palm Sunday two thousand years ago – the crowds in town for the Passover celebration watching Jesus' entry into the City

just because it was happening – it was a parade. Street sellers darted in and out hawking their goods. Historian Josephus estimates Passover crowds in Jerusalem at 100,000 people. Obviously the parade gathered only a small portion of them on the steep slopes of the Mount of Olives.

Jesus comes on a borrowed donkey, a peaceful king – not with the strutting confidence of military on parade. We sense intuitively that we are in the presence of someone who knows that a dreadful ordeal must be faced, someone who seeks and finds the grace to face what lies ahead.

I think of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament reading. Isaiah, the suffering servant of God, tries to disguise his fear when he preaches to the people in exile in Babylon. His message is received with resentment and rejection. *I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.* Is. 50:6. The Scripture continues, *“The Lord God helps me....I have set my face like flint....who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.* V. 7-8.

Imagine those same emotions playing beneath a stoic face as Jesus rides down the steep rocky hillside, on a borrowed donkey.

The upper room where the disciples join in the Last Supper is a place of community and fellowship, a place of safety, support, love. Jesus told his disciples what was to happen, yet they deny the possibilities. They miss the probabilities. Peter protests his loyalty to Jesus. They are distracted by worldly thoughts, and argue about which of them is the greatest, even as Jesus instructs them on the communal remembrance of sharing the cup and the bread. This is an intimate community, laced with the weaknesses of human nature.

From the upper room, Jesus goes to Gethsemane to pray. This is the place of great anguish, of vulnerability, the place of betrayal. The disciples fall asleep while Jesus prays, *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”* Judas strides onto the scene, a small crowd with him. Who are these people? Why, of all the possible ways of identifying Jesus, did Judas choose a kiss? A burlesque of the loving community? Betrayal is not an outsider’s act.

The Passion narrative moves to the house of the High Priest, where Jesus is mocked and beaten. Caiaphas confronts Jesus, *“Are you, then, the Son of God?”* Jesus answers, *“you say that I am.”* His answer does not condemn him from a religious standpoint, but it offends, it irritates, it challenges. Therefore, the assembly – the Sanhedrin – of priests and scribes urge Caiaphas to send Jesus to the justice of the Roman leader Pilate. Surely, Jesus’ activism, his condemnation of payment of taxes to the Romans – and his claim to be king – will be worthy of Roman censure.

More than the other Gospels, Luke describes the accusations against Jesus in political terms. In the end, Pilate, who sits in the seat of judgment, whose focal concern is to maintain Roman peace, finds no case against Jesus. Unable to condemn Jesus based on its own set of rules, and in the face of Pilate’s not guilty finding, the Jewish leaders continue to press their case.

Pilate is persuaded to send Jesus to the Jewish/Roman King Herod, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod and his entourage make fun of Jesus, clothing him in an elegant robe – recall the decadence of Herod and his grand palace. Herod sends him mockingly back to Pilate, in this elegant robe, with his finding that Jesus has done nothing to deserve death.

We know something about the frustration of political process by one or another group that presses its case despite, or in blatant contradiction of, the law. We recognize the loud voices of political insult and ridicule. How do *we* respond in faith to conflicts around us?

Neither Caiaphas nor Pilate are simple villains. They are responsible public figures. And yet, they act as they do, ceding to – to what? Is it really *public* pressure, or a small dissident minority? How do they face the moral dilemmas that power presents?

Confrontation, power, decadence: the collaboration of the Jewish leadership and Rome underlies the pretense of giving the decision of life or death to the Passover crowds. Who were these people who crowded into the square outside Pilate's seat of judgement -- Luke suggests these were the same religious leaders who were, themselves, unable to force Pilate, or then Herod, to determine Jesus' guilty. A sentence of death is rendered by Pilate only after "the people" – these people, the vocal minority? – seemingly demand it. Luke tells us that Pilate and Herod had been enemies; now they "*became friends with each other.*" 23:12.

On, then, to the Via Dolorosa, the road of suffering and loneliness. Simon from Cyrene helps carry the cross through narrow streets, lined with on-lookers. Yet another 'crowd'. Who among us would have dared carry that cross? The Passover pilgrims are trapped between the religious remembrance of their freedom from Egyptian bondage, and the death of Jesus' promise of the kingdom, the possibility of a Messiah.

On the hill of Golgatha is the place of dying. The place we all reach at some point, that moment when we realize that death has a timetable. Today's psalm comes to mind. The psalmist does not try to hide his distress, and in the psalm there is no sign of God's response to the desperate pleas. "*I am in trouble...my life is wasted with grief...they plot to take my life...*" Still, the psalmist finds grace through his complete trust in God. "*You are my God. My times are in your hand.*"

Jesus' cry from the cross, recorded in Matthew's Gospel, echoes the psalm, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

We must look carefully at this place of dying. There is the cross – and two others. The mocking inscription "king of the Jews" ironically identifies the true nature of Jesus. The other two crosses remind us that we are not alone at the place of dying.

The criminal, hanging crucified next to Jesus, pleads, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" Jesus says to the dying man, "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*"

Luke tells us, *And the people stood by, watching.* Luke 23:35.

Who are “the people?” What do they see? What do you see?

Will you follow Jesus all the way to the cross, to the place of forgiveness and redemptive love?

*And the people stood by, watching.*

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman  
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