

Sermon: Year A, Sunday of the Passion

Text: Matthew 26:14–27:66

Preached: April 9, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Glory and praise to you, O Lord Jesus Christ.

Am I alone in finding this day confusing? We begin with what seems to be a joyful procession, a parade, waving palm branches and singing “Hosanna!” It’s so joyous, so festive. And we walk in singing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” this beautiful hymn whose words have been sung on this day since the 9th century, and it has this wonderful triumphal tone to it. And then, BAM. I haven’t even let you sit down before we’ve moved to the sobering consideration of the cross. It’s a whipsaw action, emotionally, and frankly, it is confusing.

But I think it captures what the first disciples must have experienced in the course of this week. Remember how confused they were when Jesus suggested going back up to Jerusalem? Remember them saying, “Lord, why would we go back? They were just trying to stone you there!” Jesus’ followers thought this was madness. I think they came along with much fearfulness, with trepidation. And here comes Jesus, riding into town like a conqueror—but a conqueror on a donkey, not a white stallion. Jesus enters Jerusalem in a mockery of imperial power. He enters not with troops, but with a ragtag band of fisherfolk and construction workers and tax collectors and farmers. None of this is normal. It’s backwards. It flies in the face of what is expected.

And that crowd cheering him? In some ways, it’s more like a mob, really. The political powers of the occupying force that was Rome dreaded the Passover festival, when people from the countryside came in to the Temple in Jerusalem, swelling the city’s population. It was often a time of unrest, and that sometimes bubbled over into insurrection as the oppressed and overtaxed and poverty-stricken populace got together in large numbers and fed off of one another’s frustration. They were ripe for a fight, and charismatic leaders could cause them to pull together to flex their strength against the power of the state. It had happened before. The disciples, who often hoped that Jesus might be such a leader, must have been both exhilarated and apprehensive as they looked around them, wondering if this was the moment for Jesus to step forward and claim the throne of David.

My whole understanding of the events of the entry into Jerusalem was altered when I learned that that cry of “Hosanna!” is not a cry of praise: It is a plea for help. It is a cry of desperation. Literally, in Hebrew it means “Come save us!” It is the plea you make to a king who has the power to change things when everything is going horribly wrong. The people shouting “Hosanna!” know little about this Jesus, other than the word that had spread about his ability to heal and to work wonders. They pin their hopes on him, look to him with expectation, hoping that he might be the one to throw off Roman power and restore things to the way they used to be, the way they should be, pleading for him to make their lives better. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” is a quote from the psalms that were sung as people approached the Temple, and they are a cry of acclaim to the king who is coming to their aid.

The authorities are confused, as well, anxious at how this man Jesus could stir up the crowds, fearful of what might happen if they don’t act, and act swiftly. They see him as a threat to the way things are. This procession is to them a deliberate act of provocation, an in-your-face act of defiance by an itinerant preacher from the countryside who has been confronting the way things are, challenging preconceived notions, talking about a world turned upside down. This is no triumphal procession. It is for them the ominous sign of a movement that could change everything.

We live in confusing times, as well. Things we have counted on for stability—the church, political institutions, family structure, you name it—everything seems to be on shaky ground. Over and over, people tell me they don’t know what to think anymore. We are confused and worried. We may not be living under occupation and brutality, but our world often seems shaken, both in the collective sense and in the individual sense. But the good news of this confusing day is that Jesus of Nazareth rides into our confusion and despair, hears our pleas of “hosanna, come and save!”, and willingly proceeds to save us in the most confusing of ways: not by claiming earthly power and wealth, but by emptying himself, taking on the form of a slave, and willingly proceeding all the way to the cross. Christ enters our confusion, embracing it, taking upon himself everything that is broken, everything that is not normal, and through the power of the cross and of resurrection, he breaks the power of sin and death, and emerges victorious.

The good news of this day is not in the waving of palms and acclaiming Jesus as king. The good news of this day is that our God loves us so much that he hears our cries for help, enters our painful, confusing world, and leads us through death and resurrection into the promise of the world as it shall be. When we sing the “hosanna” during Communion, let it be your own plea for rescue, and bless the One who comes to save. AMEN