

A Meditation on the Passion of Jesus of Nazareth  
Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, April 1, 2007

Today is something of a liturgical shortcut. Not that long ago, today would have been called simply Palm Sunday because it marks the occasion when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the adoring crowds waving palm branches and strewing the roadway with their cloaks to welcome the one they hoped would be their king. Palm Sunday begins Holy Week and the observances of the last seven days of Jesus of Nazareth. Not that long ago, it would have been expected that you and I would come to church as often as every day during Holy Week to hear of Jesus' final days, culminating in the remembrance of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and the crucifixion on Good Friday. Those churches that did not have services throughout the week often made up for it on Friday by offering worship services that lasted for three hours. You were back in church for Holy Saturday to keep the Easter Vigil until Easter morning. Now the Church, believing that you probably can't be bothered to come to worship during Holy Week, has decided to take a shortcut and offer the combined Palm/Passion Sunday.

Shortcuts can both present and solve problems. In my high school computer programming class, for instance, I often took the shortcut of using someone else's program instead of writing my own. While I did pass the class, I came away with absolutely no understanding of how computer programming actually works. By a similar logic, the Church reasons that if we simply hear the "hurrays" and "hosannas" of Palm Sunday and go directly to the "hallelujahs" of Easter Sunday without passing the horror of Good Friday, then our understanding of reality will not simply be diminished, but actually distorted. Thus, we began our service with a joyful proclamation and palm branch procession, before hearing the doleful account of the betrayal, arrest, trial, mockery, and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

This curious mix of triumphal entry and terrible execution, of jubilation and humiliation reminds us that God would take no shortcuts in the matter of human salvation. The Scriptures attest that “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4-5a). Of all the possible ways in which God could have acted, God chose to act in time and human history by sending his Son. There would be no shortcuts with this Son, for though he had been conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was born of a woman in the natural order of things and subject to human needs. This Jesus hungered and thirsted in the desert where for forty days he was tried by Satan, tempted to take the shortcut to worldly power and authority. Jesus demurred, refusing to take the shortcut, choosing to rely entirely on the power and promise of God.

It was the power and promise of God that Jesus preached as he traveled throughout Galilee, announcing the coming kingdom of God and giving signs of its present reality in the miracles and cures that he performed. When Jesus entered Jerusalem many thought that it would be to inaugurate this promised kingdom, to claim the throne of Israel, to become the king of the Jews. But Jesus did not go to a palace. He went to supper, and there he told his disciples that the bread which they were breaking was his body and the wine that they shared was his blood. Whenever they gathered to break bread and drink wine, they were to remember him.

And when the supper was over, Jesus took his disciples to the Mount of Olives where he told them to pray that they might not come into the time of trial, for he knew that the hour of his trial was at hand. Indeed Jesus knew all that was about to take place, so he himself prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42). Perhaps there could be a shortcut, a way out, a means of fulfilling the purposes of God that did not involve the gruesome specter of the cross. “Yet not my will but yours be done,”

Jesus prayed. The answer was that there would be no shortcut. The way of salvation led to the cross.

The way of salvation led to the cross because Love takes no shortcuts. Love is patient and kind, not insisting on its own way or resentful if that way is not chosen. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the return of the lost. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love endured the cross. Love seeks to give itself away completely. Love gave the last full measure of devotion for you and for me.

“O Love divine, what hast thou done!  
The immortal God hath died for me!  
The Father’s co-eternal Son bore all my sins upon the tree.  
Th’ immortal God for me hath died:  
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!” (Charles Wesley, 1742)