

Prior to 1962 with Vatican 2, Holy Week in a Protestant Church was decidedly different from today. On Palm Sunday, Presbyterians and most protestants, came to worship to wave palm branches, sing Faure's "The Palms" and to shout "Hosanna!" Never questioning what this archaic word meant. Palms were these giant blades of grass, you received once a year, that made keen swords, or tools to tickle someone's ear. If we had mid-week programs during Lent, even Holy Week, it was a Pot-Luck Supper, possibly a movie or a Hymn-sing, or a nighttime version of Vacation Bible School. There was no Worship on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, and the following Sunday, instead of Palm branches/we had Easter Lillies, instead of Hosanna/we sang "Alleluia", before the Easter Egg hunt. In essence we had gone from Jesus' Triumphal Entry into David's Holy City, to Resurrection's Triumph over Death, to a Pagan Spring, without any mention of suffering, atonement, sacrifice or death. We went from the Crescendo of Jesus being recognized as Messiah, that had been building from the opening verses, to an even greater Climax, without any counter-point in between. Imagine the deafening thunder of 4th of July Fireworks, surpassed by something even bigger, brighter, louder, more earth-shattering! Imagine the greatest accomplishment of your life: a Graduation, a Wedding, a Birth, a Retirement with all of the years of work, preparation, expectation, and exhaustion... now surpassed by something far greater, unexpected, sacred and Divine!

Across the 500 years since the Reformation, if any dared marry outside their religion, which meant Catholic versus Protestant, it was grounds for excommunication and shunning, by the church, family and community. So of course, there was no conversation or communication between Protestants and Catholics, especially about the crux of Holy Week. When Vatican 2 occurred, ecumenical conversation began to take place! We recognized that, more than Catholics calling the Cross a Crucifix, the Catholic emphasis on the Cross was on "Suffering Atonement for sin"; versus the Protestant "Resurrected Cross" that some recognized only as empty.

One of the few "good things" that came out of this COVID Pandemic, is that people began worshipping on-line through multiple different churches every week! Coming to recognize that what "the Lectionary" requires is that Churches, regardless of denomination, read the same passages for any given day or week. Which led to talking with our neighbors and family about what Father soandso said, and how this was similar and different from what Pastor Diane or Pastor Craig preached. I named this as "Good", because anything that causes us to listen to those different from us, to consider something different than what we believe in isolation, is GOOD. Instead of a denominational seminary, I graduated from a Graduate School of Religion, which meant that our faculty and students were Roman Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, AME Zion, Baptist, Brethren, Disciples, Methodist, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Episcopal, all listening to each other and growing in faith in GOD by exchange of practices, ideas, faith.

So why do we celebrate Palm Sunday?

Because as the climax to Jesus' ministry, he came to be recognized at the Temple in the City of Jerusalem. This is the ultimate Children's Bible Story, because Palm Sunday is about children, about grown-ups doing things like kids! They had a Parade!, They sang songs! They climbed trees to pull off branches and scatter leaves, even laying down their robes and cloaks to make a carpet. Try to imagine how exciting it was in a world without paved roads, without floors of wood, tile or carpet, to have a parade led by Jesus riding on a Donkey, walking on a carpet! A Rabbi coming to the City of David, as everyone waved branches and bowed before Jesus acclaiming him somebody important, a King, a Messiah, a Savior, the Son of God!

But, why did Jesus do this?

Because every year, part of Passover, was waiting for the coming of God's Messiah. In the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, King Solomon built the Temple in the City of David Jerusalem, but one king after

another failed and fell away from God. Finally, the Prophet Elijah who had stood up for God against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and her 500 prophets of Baal, was carried off in a Flaming Chariot to Heaven, then the Temple was destroyed and Israel exiled to Babylon for 70 years before returning. All this inspiring belief that when God would send a Savior/the Messiah, they had to come to Jerusalem to be recognized.

Why and how should we recognize the Messiah/the Savior coming to Jerusalem?

Psalm 118 is a psalm of Thanksgiving, which praises God for a specific act of redemption in their life. A word we do not often use today is **SALVATION**. The Psalmist describes I stood ALONE, not only against an ADVERSARY, but whole NATIONS surrounded, pressing in like a hoard of bees swarming to attack, like a fire of burning dried thorn bushes where you are trapped and there is no escape. SALVATION is more than a Rescue, this is LIFE & DEATH, eradication from history versus DIVINE INTERVENTION for you and for me. The Psalmist makes you think they are a King, perhaps King Hezekiah, who was helpless against Babylonian General Sennacherib destroying Jerusalem, and the king/the Psalmist thought they were as good as dead. I have been there and guess you may have been as well. Dark nights when I have sat on the Chancel Steps silently screaming to GOD: What am I supposed to learn from this? WHY? What am I supposed to do?

We have all seen old Westerns, filmed at Old Tucson, where the Hero stands alone against overwhelming evil. The Hero knows and we know, the Hero is going to be killed, but somehow they are redeemed. This entire Psalm hangs on A Characteristic of God: GOD hears our CRIES, GOD ANSWERS PRAYERS, transforming mourning & weeping into dancing & rejoicing, changing terrors of unending night into dawn. This is Israel's most foundational experience, the identity for who GOD is and who we are as believers. Psalm 118 recalls the PASSOVER, slaves in Egypt crying out and God brought them out of the House of bondage in Israel's Defining Story, recognizing the power of GOD to overcome even the most menacing terrorists and threatening forces in our world, NOW Embodied in our Savior, Jesus.

4 times at the beginning of this, then again at the end, the Psalmist calls the religious community to praise God for "GOD's Steadfast Love." The Hebrew word for STEADFAST LOVE is "CHESED," meaning Covenant Loyalty, unwavering commitment, the force that compels God to act on behalf of those GOD loves, even at the cost of GOD's own life. In other religions, GODS NEVER RISKED DYING, that GOD would Die for GOD's PEOPLE was incredible. The PALM SUNDAY WORD, "**Hosanna**" literally means "**SAVE US!**" So the cry is not celebration for the coming of Jesus, it is a plea to God **For GOD to be GOD** and for GOD to **SAVE US, Son of David, Save us!**

SALVATION for the Psalmist is not an act of Righteousness, or Religion, but a covenant commitment in awe of GOD! In our world today, there is so much Defeat and Anger, Sensationalism, Fear and Isolation. PALM SUNDAY is celebration that REPRIEVE and REDEMPTION are possible! That wars not simply end by soldiers coming home, still suffering from the trauma they witnessed, but that wars end because of people standing firm for their commitment to GOD and GOD's commitment to us.

Among my favorite stories, is one from WWI, when Allied French and English soldiers were in one trench, and German forces in the other. Approaching midnight, Christmas Eve, all the shooting and mustard gas bombs stopped... as someone began singing Silent Night. One soldier ventured out into the field between them with fruitcake from home. They sang together and exchanged tokens. Afterward, neither side could be compelled to fight the other. Palm Sunday is a moment of Redemption & Reprieve, that nations may still go to war, we may be killed tomorrow, but standing up for what we believe about GOD, there is peace.