

“*And every knee shall bend*”

April 1, 2007

Text: *Isaiah 50:4-9, Philippians 2:5-11*

I.

In many ways, Palm Sunday is confusing ... confusing in that it sends out double messages—messages that would seem to be contradictory.

When you think of Palm Sunday, what image do you have? My guess is it's the same image I had growing up in the church ... the image of Jesus riding triumphantly into Jerusalem ... amidst shouts of *Hosanna! Hosanna!* Or, in the more modern vernacular: *way to go, Jesus ... or, go get 'em, Jesus ...* like a parade with all sorts of celebrating along the way.

- Yet, in the tradition, Palm Sunday is also referred to as *Passion Sunday*, signifying Jesus' suffering and *passion* on the cross that awaited him.
- Perhaps the critical point in it all is the decision to go to Jerusalem in the first place, to the center of political and religious power.

While the biblical depiction of Jesus entering Jerusalem amidst all the pomp and celebration is mostly symbolic, it's from the point of view of the gospel writers. Clearly their intent is to lift up Jesus in any way they can. It's their purpose to *magnify* the event, to elevate Jesus' stature.

On the other hand, from the point of view of Jesus himself, the gospel of Luke gives us some clues as to what he must have been feeling on a personal level ... as he entered the holy city ... full of yearning and a longing in his spirit to be faithful to God's calling.

II.

Immediately after Luke's Palm Sunday story, check out these events in Luke (Luke 19):

1. *As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying: **If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes.***

From these words, we catch a sense of the *tension* and the *strife* in Jesus' spirit.

- He knows that things are not good.
- He senses that forces are lining up against him.
- He also knows that all of Israel's great prophets—at some point—had to go to Jerusalem ... and that many of them were killed.

- All of which serves to remind us that speaking truth to power is always dangerous activity. People on the top seldom want to hear any *murmuring* of truth from down under.
2. And then, immediately after these fleeting moments of introspection and sadness, Luke's Jesus enters the temple and begins driving out the money-changers, an act that infuriated those who opposed him all the more.

III.

Palm Sunday is really about preparing ourselves as Christians for the dark realities and the harsh truths that led to Jesus' suffering and crucifixion.

It's an invitation to a new awakening ... about humility and *humbleness of spirit*. Second Isaiah alludes to it in our first scripture reading that Anne just shared with you from **Isaiah 50**.

This reading is actually from one of the *servant songs* (of which there are four) in Second Isaiah. The *servant*, most likely Israel, unveils a new way of relating to the world ... a way marked by humility and suffering love. Very likely, Jesus identified with the *servant* in these songs, particularly in Isaiah 53.

These values signal a breakthrough of enormous proportions, much like what we saw in the Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., where humility and non-violence win the day.

Listen to the poetic words of the servant from **Isaiah 50**:

*Morning by morning he awakens my ear; the Lord has opened my ear, he says.
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 ...*

This is major "turn the other cheek" stuff ... and love your enemies ...

IV.

Wow! The power of the suffering servant to draw people in and to turn their lives in a direction of peace. We see this same theme lifted up in our reading this morning from Philippians 2.

As many of you will recall, Paul wrote Philippians from prison—no doubt in a pensive and contemplative mood. In this mood, powerful strains of *the Christ event*—particularly Jesus' suffering and death—were very much alive in Paul's spirit.

And being aware of all of this ... i.e., that Jesus actually suffered and died such an awful, painful death, gave Paul strength. It deepened and strengthened his own personal commitment, just as it heightened his sense of the power and the purpose of *sacrificial love*.

In the BIG PICTURE of things, that's what this is all about—the **sacrificial love**. In the tradition and in the church, we tend to underestimate the implications of all this theologically.

1. Because of the way we think about Jesus' death, the sacrificial love gets swept under the table. Easily, we forget ... that Jesus really suffered ... and really died an awful death on the cross.
2. The cross wasn't part of some cosmic plan; it certainly wasn't God's idea. What kind of a God would conceive of such a thing? It was the sin of the world that nailed Jesus to the cross.
3. The sacrificial love was real; and it's precisely this profoundly human act of suffering that draws us in. Paul knows this; and he understands it an act of strength ... and courage ... and compassion ... and profound faith.

V.

And so Paul can say, *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*.

He's trying to encourage the Philippians, reminding them that—always—it's all about the love. Clearly, Paul believes, *if we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, we'll have the same love as well*.

Then Paul gives us two images that help convey how *having the same mind* can happen for us.

He says that Jesus **emptied himself** ... ostensibly of all ego or pretense or worldly impulses. And then, that he **humbled himself** ... becoming obedient to wherever his faith journey might lead.

Friends, these actions by Jesus are part of his tremendous gift to us. And it's because of this that God exalted him beyond death ...

- and *gave him the name*, Paul adds, *that is above every name*.
- *So that at the name of Jesus **every knee should bend** ... in heaven and on earth ... and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is LORD** ...*

What Palm Sunday is about, friends—in the BIG PICTURE of things—is a humble journey to an awful cross. But again, the cross is NOT the intent; it's not Jesus' or God's goal. It's the consequence of the humility and the love. The world can't handle it ... it can't contain it ... so it kills it.

But the KEY is the humility ... the humble spirit. This is where the power of God comes alive in the world and makes such a difference.

VI.

As in our reading from **Philippians**, it challenges us to *get out of the way* ... of ourselves—with all our busyness ... and pride ... and assumptions about this or that—so we can be more open to the *mystery* of God and the mystery of life.

A priest who was terminally ill, wrote in his diary ...

At nearly every funeral I conduct, I say something like ...

- *Death is such an overwhelmingly powerful experience that it opens us to the deepest, most powerful ideas and questions and convictions about life—and especially our own individual lives: our dreams and purposes and ideals and hopes.*
- *And isn't it a shame, he notes, that sometimes it takes the death of a beloved family member or friend to awaken us to this reality.*

And the priest goes on saying, *How we need to take hold of life, with all its beauty and power ... **right now, today.***

- Because LIFE is so very precious. And it's for *living*. And for being *passionate* about stuff we care about. And it's for *sharing* with those we love.

*To know this truth, really know it, is to be **free.***

- Free from any anxiety or fear or low self-esteem ...
- Free from any guilt or resentment or anger that lingers ...

Friends, to know Christ is to know this freedom ... and it is to catch the spirit of Paul's experience of the *living Christ* when he reminds us how God highly exalted him ...

1. and gave him the name that is above every name,
2. so that at the name of **Jesus**, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth,
3. and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God ...

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com