

April 9th, 2017: Landscape of Lent: Palms



Today I want us to think about palms; but not the ones we received this morning and waved as we cried “Hosanna!” And not the palms that make us think of a tropical island, but the ones that are part of our hands! Our hands, palms and fingers are amazing things. Anatomy tells us that each hand is comprised of 29 bones, 123 ligaments, 34 muscles, 48 nerves, 30 arteries. Hands can hold. Hands can bless. Hands can make a fist to fight or to clench in restraint. Hands can comfort. Hands can heal. Hands can shake to close a deal. We depend on hands for so many things we do, from brushing our teeth and combing our hair, to eating, drinking and texting, to tucking kids into bed and wielding the remote.

In some ways, the story of Holy Week can be told by our hands—our palms: Palms that waved green branches as Jesus entered Jerusalem, giving way to Palms that exchanged coins betraying Jesus to the Jewish leaders who were plotting against him, and ending with Palms that were pierced with nails. The week before us is one we remember with broken hearts, astonishment, and awe at the length and depth and breadth of Jesus’ love.

The first palms of this week are the palms of praise. All four gospel writers recall the same scene. Jesus makes a dramatic entry into Jerusalem, the center of both religious and political leadership, both of which oppose his message of justice and liberating love. Jesus does not enter the city gates under cover of night, but in the brightness of the day, riding a donkey in fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecies about the Messiah, the savior. While conquering heroes and political leaders would ride into town on a glorious steed, a beautiful and mighty horse highlighting that leader’s strength and majesty, Jesus rode instead on the back of a donkey... a beast of burden, and the people loved it! They cut branches from the trees, threw their coats on the ground as we would a red carpet, and then they sang, shouted, and celebrated. Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!

This Hosanna cheer, which translates to “Save Us!”, tells us what the people were hoping for from Jesus... they were expecting salvation from the Roman tyranny... a true conquering hero to bring political freedom, but Jesus was not that kind of conqueror... he had come on a donkey after all, not on horse... humble, not self-glorifying. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus came to usher in, does not always meet with our expectations, our hopes, or our worldly dreams.

Have you ever had hopes for Christ’s action in your life go unfulfilled? Have you ever felt your prayers were unanswered? It’s a heart wrenching thing to have your expectations shattered by reality, whether those expectations are of God, of another person in our lives, or of ourselves!!! One of my sisters is struggling through the emotional turmoil of unmet expectations. She and her husband have been trying to get pregnant since they got married, with no success. After going to a fertility specialist last month, she just learned it will be harder than they had hoped. While she’s still processing the news and what it means for their future and potential for having kids, she’s angry, heart broken,

and feeling betrayed... Why would God put such a longing in her heart to have kids, but not the physical ability? She's wondering where is God in all of this!?!

How many times have we wondered how the shouts of the crowds turned so quickly from "Hosanna!" to "Crucify Him!?" We, who know what it feels like to have our expectations shattered, can relate. Amid devastation, frustration, and anxiety, we lash out... do things we would not have thought possible, we betray ourselves and our loved ones, and say things we wish we could take back. But there are no "take backs" in our story today... On Friday night, we will be walking out of this sanctuary in silence after hearing the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death.

So, in a way, there hangs over this morning, even with the joyful hosannas still ringing in our ears, a sense of impending pain, struggle, and doom. Behind closed doors inside the city, nervous Pharisees & Sadducees were plotting how to finally get rid of this Jesus, who claimed to be the Son of God. They first considered capturing him in secret and killing him, but Caiaphas the high priest was afraid that the people supporting Jesus would cause a riot during the Passover, so that plan was abandoned. When we read from the 26th chapter of Matthew, it seemed like religious enemies of Jesus were stymied. Until they were paid a visit by Judas. Matthew records: Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. (Matthew 26:14-16)

From palm to palm, coins were passed. Taken from the Temple Treasury, given to the chief priest, then placed in Judas' palm, thirty coins set the ball rolling to Jesus' demise – and the rest is history. Betrayal, denial, judgment, and violence fill the hours and days between Palm Sunday and Resurrection Sunday. The betrayal of Jesus did not end with Judas. Peter denied his friend and master three times. The religious leaders judged him a heretic. The crowds shouted "Crucify him!" Pilate condemned him. Betrayal came in so many ways by so many throughout Holy Week.

And still it doesn't end. Even today, betrayals abound against our Lord as they did so long ago. Jesus is betrayed whenever those who claim his name fail to live consistently and proactively in love. You see, Jesus was hated by the religious hard-liners because he loved the people they rejected: tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, Gentiles, lepers, & [pause for a beat] women. He was hated because he placed compassion and love above laws and traditions that kept such people marginalized, isolated, and demeaned. We who are called to have the mind and spirit of Jesus betray him when we allow our own self-interest, our own prejudices, our own unspoken acceptance of the status quo to limit the ways we could help make God's kingdom a reality here on earth, as it is in heaven.

- We betray Jesus when we see people in need and close our hearts against them.
- We betray Jesus when we gather coins into our own palms... while others live in hunger and poverty.
- We betray Jesus when we know what HE would do...but are afraid to do it.
- We betray Jesus when we ignore the love he insisted upon and embrace hate.

This holiest of weeks is a time for prayerful reflection, a time to ask how we're doing living as faithful followers of Christ? This morning you were given a palm branch and a coin. I invite you to take them both out now and place one in each hand. They represent palms of praise...and palms of betrayal... Where are you today in the Passion story? Where are you along this journey through the Landscape of Lent as we move ever closer to the cross? Do you have Palms of Praise that lift up hope, joy, love & adoration to our King? Feel the branch in your hand... Is there excitement & hope for what Christ will do...what he can do... in your life, your work, your family, our church? OR Do you have Palms of Betrayal that give or grab hate, fear, apathy & greed? Feel that coin in your hand... Is there something that is directing your heart and mind and life away from the Light of the World, away from a love that is unconditionally available to all?

Palms of praise and palms of betrayal...Both are always ever before us—as they were for Judas, Peter, all the disciples, the religious leaders, and the crowds. This Palm Sunday we are being challenged to prayerfully consider how will we use our palms...our hands...our hearts...our lives this week? Which symbol of this day will be our reality, our choice, our way of being in this world? Which palm will you raise?