

Cries of a Desperate People

Sermon notes for the sermon
Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young
On Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011

What images of Palm Sundays past come to mind for you today? Do you see yourself as a child being invited to distribute palm fronds to those who had gathered for worship? Or, maybe you remember a processional at the beginning of worship with the choir and ministers waving palms in the air while all sang "Hosanna to the Son of David." Perhaps you were one of those children, like me, who had to wait until worship was over to get a palm frond because the year before you were torturing your brother with one during worship the year before. Perhaps you remember being taught in Sunday school or by an aunt or uncle how to fold a bright green and flexible palm frond into a cross and then as days and weeks passed you saw it dry and shrivel up. One of the long standing traditions in our church on Palm Sunday is to sing "The Palms" and I want to thank our Director of Music, Jean Volk, for bringing together our intergenerational choir for this purpose today.

During this past week I was reflecting with my brother about memories of Palm Sundays past and we both agreed that it was a happy day for us. We remember joining with the crowd from centuries before welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem. We remember joining our voices with their shouts and songs of, "Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" We remember chasing each other with our Palm fronds and being scolded by our parents and members of the church telling us to knock it off. My boys will remember bringing palm fronds home and seeing our cats play for hours with them. As my brother and I reflected it made us feel

good to be part of the story and to join in the celebration of welcoming Jesus to the holy city and welcoming him into our hearts. I hope that your memories bring you the joy and warmth that they brought to us this past week.

One of the things that is important for us to remember today is the meaning of the word "hosanna." It is the Greek form of a Hebrew word, hoshanna, which literally means "Save, we beseech thee!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, he did so as many self-proclaimed messiahs had done before. He was greeted by the masses in the same way they had greeted each self-proclaimed messiah. Hosanna was a cry of a desperate people hungry for change and revolution.

During Jesus' life time the nation of Israel was an occupied nation living under Roman rule. The pax Romana or the peace of Rome was maintained under martial law. Roman soldiers were present in each village and the peace of the community was kept by force. The Roman governor, who represented the emperor, was charged with seeing to it that peace was kept and had absolute authority to do so by any means necessary. Under Roman occupation, the Jews were permitted to have their religious leaders and rulers. Roman was a political form of government; Israel was governed by their religious leaders. In addition to using military force to keep the peace the Roman governor met in private rooms with certain religious leaders of the Jews to broker deals. Most deals were shady at best granting wealth and continuance of position for the Jewish religious leaders in exchange for allowing Rome to rule. The religious and political climate in Jerusalem the day that Jesus rode in to the holy city on a donkey was one that was ripe for change.

The everyday, good working people of Israel had had it with Roman occupation. They did not like the soldiers badgering them and threatening them. They did not like having to pay heavy taxes to Rome while their children practically starved to death. They did not support the corrupt religious leaders who with each step of the way sold out their people and their God to Rome each time they made a deal with the governor. The people were ready and desperate for change.

Those who welcomed Jesus, the Messiah, to Jerusalem on this day so long ago were looking for one who would overthrow the religious ruling council and lead a rebellion against the Romans. They were desperate for change and their shouts of greeting on that first Palm Sunday were desperate cries for battle. The Jews knew their history and so they knew that if Jesus was really the promised Messiah then nothing could stand in their way. With a true Son of God they would be victorious in defeating the Romans and reestablish the reign of God in the Temple with a pure, undefiled priesthood. Jesus was very well aware of this. One often overlooked fact is that Jesus had in his number of 12 apostles one who held these beliefs and was following Jesus for this very reason. We know him as Judas Iscariot. What we seldom remember is that the name "Iscariot" means "dagger bearer." Judas was a zealot along with some of the other followers of Jesus who was desperate for change and revolution.

God was in Jesus reconciling the world to himself and so the change that God offered to the crowd that day was a revolution of the heart and not a cry to take up arms. God, in Jesus the Christ, sought to transform the human heart bringing justice with peace. By the end of this week the crowd that so desperately welcomed Jesus as the Messiah, turned to another would-be messiah, Jesus Barabbas.

Rev. Adam Hamilton reminds us that the name Barabbas is literally translated "son of God." Is it not ironic that the crowd embraced the violence of revolt which was led by Jesus Barabbas – Jesus the son of God – while at the same time shouting crucify to Jesus of Nazareth the true Son of God. Jesus the Christ brings justice with God's peace while the crowd calls for justice at the end of a sword. Look around us today, not much has changed. Revolution and violence is hitting the streets in many nations. People are desperate for change but most want a quick fix. They want to oust the current leaders and install their leaders in an effort to get their way while sticking it to the current oppressors. Jesus comes to the holy city, to the holy churches throughout the world today proclaiming salvation. God's hope is that this time we will get it and allow our hearts and minds to be transformed by God's love to the end that justice will dwell in our lands and peace will reign supreme.