4-8/9-17 Palm/Passion Sunday Rev. Amy Haines

Mt 21:1-11, Mt 27:1-2,27-31,45-50 Sacrificial Love Dare You to Love Series

The journey of Holy Week has begun. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem!

Yet he arrives in a way that many did not expect.

Have you ever watched the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade? We expect that after all of the floats and balloons and bands and singers comes the stars of the parade—Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Have you ever watched an awards shows on TV? We expect the stars of screen and stage and music to arrive on the red carpet and not through a back door, dressing to be noticed by the press and their peers.

Even Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover festival

in a way that was expected of him—with a show of force, led by 1000 soldiers, reminding the Jews who was supposed to be in control.

Jesus, however, did not arrive in the way expected of God’s Messiah. For the Jews were looking for the Messiah to be a conquering hero, not a suffering servant. They were looking for a sword, not a cross. They were expecting the Messiah to arrive on a mighty stead, not the colt of a donkey. They were expecting a mighty army, not a ragtag bunch of fishermen and women.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ arrival did cause a stir.

Those who knew their faith history recognized that Jesus’ arrival on a donkey echoed the prophet Zechariah who proclaimed:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (9.9)

Those who had journeyed down from the Galilee region knew firsthand the stories of Jesus’ teachings and healings and miracles, and were excited that this radical rabbi was now in their midst in Jerusalem. So they raised their voices echoing the words of Psalm 118:

Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! (118.26)

I imagine the crowd that greeted Jesus was a mixture of faithful followers and curious onlookers who got caught up in the joyful atmosphere. They laid down their cloaks and palm branches, spread on the ground like a royal carpet. In word and song and action, they vowed to crown Jesus as King.

The Gospel of Matthew proclaims that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking “Who is this?” While the crowd responded, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee,” the religious leaders knew that Jesus was no ordinary prophet and his arrival in Jerusalem was no ordinary entrance.

Think about that word, turmoil. In the Greek it is the word meaning to quake or to shake.

It is the same word used to describe what happened when the magi appeared at the time of Jesus’ birth and it is the same word used to describe what happens when the tomb is emptied at Jesus’ resurrection. Turmoil. Earthquake. An earth-shaking, change the world type of event.

So turmoil is an accurate description of what happened that week in Jerusalem—yet not in the way that many expected. Where they hoped for a military leader, they instead received a suffering servant. Where they wanted a rebellion, they instead received a following. Where they wanted vengeance against Rome, they instead received a humble death on a cross.

Historians might say that the turmoil surrounding Jesus ended with his death on a cross that long ago week. Yet believers would say that the turmoil surrounding Jesus continues into our lives here and how.

For Jesus’ very presence is earth shattering. Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us, God’s very presence here on earth. He was human and divine. His life showed us how to live in relationship with God and with one another. His death showed us the depth of God’s love for us, a love that frees us from sin. His resurrection shattered even the bonds of death, giving us hope for eternal life.

Jesus’ very presence is still earth shattering today. He challenges us not to listen to voices around us that put us down. Instead, he reminds us of who and whose we are. He seeks to shatter the bonds of sin and death and hopelessness and despair that hold us down.

He still offers us new life—if we are willing to proclaim him as king.

The story of Holy Week calls us to believe and to proclaim, Jesus is our King, our Messiah, our Savior, our Lord, from palms to an empty tomb and everywhere in between.

As we sang on Ash Wednesday (and in our middle hymn today)-

There for me the Savior stands, shows his wounds and spreads his hands.

God is love! I know, I feel; Jesus weeps and loves me still. (355 v4)

Jesus’ love is shown not through power but through sacrifice. He gains us the victory over sin and death not through violence but through humility.

As another classic hymn goes-

Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe

Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow

Philippians 2 proclaims:

[Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (2.7-8)

On this Palm/Passion Sunday, we move from the joy of the parade to the agony of the cross,

all the while proclaiming Jesus’ sacrificial love. Jesus’ death was for a reason. He was not killed because the religious leaders hated his preaching. He was not killed because Pilate refused to stand firm against a possible riot. He was not killed because the crowd wanted blood.

Rather, Jesus died because it accomplished God’s redemption of God’s people. Jesus went to the cross to complete God’s plan to offer us the final sacrifice for our sins. Jesus suffered on the cross to offer us a way back into right relationship with God.

I love the way Rev. Adam Hamilton states it:

“Jesus paid a price he did not owe, giving us a gift of grace we did not deserve.”

--24 Hours Book p. 67

..A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

--Luis Palau, Experiencing God's Forgiveness, Multnomah Press, 1984. Sermonillustrations.com:mercy

.. D.M. Stearns was once preaching in Philadelphia when at the close of the service a stranger came up to him and said, "I don't like the way you spoke about the cross. I think that instead of emphasizing the death of Christ, it would be far better to preach Jesus, the teacher and example."

Stearns replied, "If I presented Christ in that way, would you be willing to follow Him?"

"I certainly would," said the stranger without hesitation.

"All right then," said the preacher, "let's take the first step. He did no sin. Can you claim that for yourself?" The man looked confused and somewhat surprised.

"Why, no," he said. "I acknowledge that I do sin."

Stearns replied, "Then your greatest need is to have a Savior, not an example!"

--Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com: Jesus as Savior

The story of Holy Week is the story of our Savior’s sacrificial love for us.

When I think about Jesus’ suffering in the hours before his crucifixion, my mind is drawn to Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion.” While Gibson takes creative license on several scenes in the movie, his portrayal of Jesus’ suffering, especially at the time of his flogging, is extremely graphic, extremely bloody and extremely hard to watch. Unlike our sanitized movies and pictures in the church that are suitable for the eyes of young children, Gibson’s movie, in my opinion, gets closer at the agonizing truth of the suffering Jesus endured.

Jesus suffered emotionally. Jesus suffered physically. Jesus suffered humiliation—

all before he ever was nailed to the cross.

Emotionally Jesus had to endure the loss of his disciples in his time of trial. One betrayed him,

eleven deserted him, and one denied him three times after pledging never to do so.

Emotionally Jesus had to endure not only the religious leaders’ misunderstanding, but also his own disciples’ misunderstanding, of who he was and the meaning of his death. They were all looking for a political messiah with military might. They were not looking for a suffering servant

who would come with the power of love and forgiveness.

Physically Jesus suffered from the moment of his arrest. He was manhandled by the guards of the high priest in the garden. He was spit upon and slapped by members of the Jewish high council. He was flogged by Pilate’s soldiers before he was crucified, a brutal lashing that would have left him very weak, very wounded, and very bloody.

Then Jesus was made to carry his own crossbeam to Golgotha, a beam that would have weighed close to 100 pounds. That is a heavy load to carry for any strong man, let alone one who was just flogged within inches of his life. Imagine the wood of the crossbeam chafing against the open wounds on Jesus’ back.

Between his flogging and his crucifixion Jesus also had to suffer public humiliation at the hands of the Roman soldiers for their entertainment. The Gospels proclaim that the whole cohort was present for Jesus’ mock coronation. That would be 300-600 of Rome’s finest military might

surrounding a bruised and beaten and bloody man.

They sought to make him scream; they sought break his spirit. Jesus was unlike most condemned prisoners in that he did not lash out and curse at the soldiers; he did not try and fight back; he did not emphatically declare his innocence or be proud of his insurrectionist tendencies. That is what these soldiers were used to; they were not used to a silent man accepting of his fate.

So the soldiers publicly humiliated Jesus through a mock coronation, since the charge against him read “King of the Jews.” They stripped him. They placed a purple cloak upon his bleeding shoulders, purple being the color of royalty. They twisted a crown of thorns to imitate the laurel crown that Caesar wore and placed those thorns upon Jesus’ head. They put a reed in his hand as scepter. Then the soldiers mocked Jesus, kneeling in front of him, saluting him and crying out “Hail, King of the Jews!” They continued to spit on him and strike him, lash at him and taunt him.

Then when their time of sport was over, they ripped the purple cloak from Jesus’ bleeding skin,

dressed him, and made him begin the painful final journey to Golgotha.

Jesus sacrificed himself willingly—out of his great love for us. He humbly laid down his life so that we may live.

When we reflect on Jesus’ death on the cross, are we affected by such grace? When we hear the story of his sacrificial love, are we ready to have our sins forgiven? When we begin to understand the lengths that God will go to have an eternal relationship with us, are we still doubters rather than believers in Jesus?

Pilate, the Jewish leaders, the crowd at Jesus’ crucifixion—

they all missed the truth, that Jesus indeed was the King of the Jews.

The women, the disciples, even Joseph of Arimathea—

they all figured his burial would be the end of his incredible life story.

But you and I know the rest of the story, that which we celebrate next Sunday on Easter morning—death did not have the final word! Jesus’ story continues throughout eternity.

This Holy Week we are called to do more than simply go through the motions of worship.

We are called to be more than spectators observing from afar.

This Holy Week, we are called to respond to Christ’s love with our love, to Christ’s service with our service, to Christ’s sacrifice with our faith.

This Holy Week we are called to get up and follow Jesus as disciples, reaching out to a lost and hurting world with humility and grace. We are called to get up and follow Jesus as disciples, reaching out in faith and hope to a world full of despair. We are called to get up and follow Jesus as disciples, reaching out in love and service wherever God calls us to go.

Most of us will not be called to service halfway around the world. Instead consider who you come in contact with each week who is struggling or hurting. Consider how you can reach out in even some small way to those around you.

Jesus dared to love us with no less than his life. May we ponder this week how that sacrificial love makes a difference in our lives, then find one way in which we intentionally share that same love with others.

The journey of Holy Week has begun.

May the journey be more than just in the church—

may the journey also be in our hearts.

As we wave our palms, as we drink the cup, as we survey the wondrous cross—

may we respond to Jesus’ sacrificial love through giving our devotion, our lives, our love, our all.

May it be so.

Amen.