

The Intrusion of Holy Week

Palm/Passion Sunday

Luke 19:28-40
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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As a preacher, I know that I am not alone in considering this to be a particularly difficult Sunday when it comes to trying to decide the focus of the sermon. Part of the difficulty comes with the fact that over 20% of the entire gospel story is contained between the events of today (Palm Sunday) and next week (Easter). In the gospel of Luke, for example, five of his twenty-four chapters are dedicated to this last week of Jesus' life.

So for instance, if I were to preach only about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem this Sunday, and then preach about the joy of the Resurrection next Sunday, and if you didn't attend either the Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services of worship, you would miss the impact of events such as Jesus cleansing the Temple, the Last Supper, the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' arrest, betrayal, trial, denial, and of course his suffering and the crucifixion itself. Therefore, we can't skip over the reality of the tragic events of this week and go straight to Easter. For if we do, we risk missing the impact of the meaning behind the stories of the Resurrection.

In looking for a different approach to Palm Sunday this year, I came across something that I hadn't really considered before. It was in an article by the **Rev. Dr. Hugh Eichelberger**, a retired Presbyterian minister living in North Carolina. He moves this ancient story from its historical roots to a practical application to our own lives. He asks:

When we sit before this [Palm Sunday] moment in time do we simply hear it as a particular and peculiar moment in history, OR is it an event that happens again and again?

He continues, "I understand that Good Friday was an actual day – the day on which Jesus was crucified, but I also see Good Friday as a way of thinking about all the tragic, senseless, unjust experiences that come in life, that defy understanding, and make the love of God look like a mockery. In every life there are Good Friday days where all good hopes seem to die and there appears to be no justice. In the midst of our Good Fridays we wait, and hope and long for Easter.

"Is the same true of Palm Sunday? Are there Palm Sundays in every life?" Eichelberger answers his rhetorical question, "I believe there are. I believe that we often have as much difficulty welcoming those moments in our life as did the crowds of long ago who first welcomed Jesus and then turned on him." He continues:

What is Palm Sunday? It is an intrusive moment. Jesus has quit preaching and gone to meddling. Palm Sunday began to go bad when it became clear that Jesus was a threat to the way things were organized in the city of Jerusalem [and to its organized religion]. On Palm Sunday it becomes

clear that when God enters our lives, God not only blesses, heals, teaches and leads, God also confronts and disturbs. Palm Sunday is the moment when it becomes clear that God is concerned not only with our spiritual health, [but with every single aspect of every day of our lives].

Palm Sunday happens when we discover and hear that God has not entered our lives to help us do our work, but that God has come to call us back to do God's work.

Palm Sunday happens when something takes place that disturbs the normal commerce of our daily lives. It happens when the Spirit of God challenges the way our faith has entered into partnership with our pocketbook, and our religion into the service of our national interest. Jesus was welcomed because it was expected that he would be of service to the city, and of service to the national ambitions of the Jews, but instead he called the city [and the religious leaders] to repentance. Whenever our lives are disturbed in that way, Palm Sunday happens.

It is always disturbing when God enters our lives. We can respond to that disturbance with hostility and rejection [as the crowd does later on in the week] or we can welcome Christ as liberator and life giver, as one who comes in the name of the Lord. Over and over again in the Bible the initial response of people to the intrusion of God is a response of fear. But over and over we hear God's gracious words, 'Be not afraid.' **The only reason we need to fear in the presence of God is if we are more committed to keeping things the way they are than we are open to welcoming God into our lives.**

And, I would add, to allowing ourselves to be transformed by that intrusion.

Now, I know this congregation well enough to realize that some of you probably cringed when I read Rev. Eichelberger's statement, "...when God enters our lives..." That would imply an understanding of a God "out there" somewhere, a transcendent God who comes from somewhere out in the cosmos in order to "enter into" our lives.

Yes, I agree that it appears that Eickelberger's premise is that the intrusion of God into our lives comes somewhere from without. I also acknowledge that there are many here who have a different understanding of God: that God is basically *within* us, an imminent God, and not one "out there" somewhere.

Speaking personally, all of this for me is not an "either/or" premise, but a "both/and" understanding of the nature of God. Therefore, **while I can still accept the concept of God intruding in my life from somewhere "out there," I can just as easily understand all of this as God coming somewhere from within. For either way, it's still an intrusion of the Divine into our otherwise routine and ordered lives.**

So on this particular Palm Sunday, I don't want to tie everything up in a nice little bow – something to look at and think, "Isn't that special." Rather, I think things should remain unsettled and unresolved. **For Holy Week isn't meant to be neat and tidy and easy.**

It is my hope that each one of us leave here this day more attuned to how God, whether from without or from within, is intruding into our lives, and into the life of this congregation. And I hope to see you again on Thursday and Friday. That way next Sunday, Easter Sunday, can indeed be a celebration of transformation and new life.

Amen.

Resource:

"The Quintessential Pilgrim" by the Rev. Dr. Hugh L. Eichelberger (PCUSA).

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