

March 24, 2013 Palm Sunday

Scripture Lessons

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 19:28-40

Sermon *Making Up Our Minds*

I think for Pastors as well as you folks as lay Christians find this Sunday which begins holy week kind of a dilemma, a kind of a mystery. What in the world should our mood be today? Should our mood be the festive happy mood we have been carrying so far in the service? Should it be a more somber mood?

I think if we focus on Palm Sunday, we have a happy mood, we have a festive mood. Hundreds of men and women and children lined the streets of Jerusalem waving those palm branches and they shouted “Hosanna to the son of David.” And that certainly suggests a celebration.

On the other hand we can't ignore the events that follow during this coming Holy Week that we face. And as you well know, the mood during Holy Week is more stressful, more somber, filled with tension and frustration, disappointment, suffering and even towards the end of the week death.

To appreciate this mixture of emotions, I think we have to go back for a few moments into Jewish history. If you were to visit Israel today, you would probably not be surprised to learn that the number one religious shrine for modern Jewish people is that which is known as the Wailing Wall. The Wailing Wall is the most popular, the Wailing Wall is a wall formed by massive stones remnants of the foundation of the last ancient temple, and in the Old Testament that temple symbolized the presence of God. And to make a pilgrimage to that Wailing Wall, in this modern day and to say prayers there is a spiritual high for the Jewish people even today.

But do you know what the second most religious shrine might be? It is the tomb of King David. The tomb is sort of modest in size, and in its setting. But make no mistake, that shrine is very, very important to the Jewish faith. But why? Because the reign of King David was the best ever in the checkered history of the people of Israel. Israel hasn't even come close to this golden age of peace and prosperity in the years and years since that time.

After King David died, his son Solomon took over. Solomon was a wise king he did a number of wonderful things, but these were overshadowed by the fact that during his reign there was a split. What had been one nation

eventually became two nations, the northern part the larger of the two was called Israel, and the smaller part in the south became Judah.

Now I will make the story short, there were civil wars, successions of weak and immoral kings, and the people of Israel were sitting ducks for those hundreds of years to people like the Syrian's, the Babylonian's, the Meds, the Persians, the Greeks, and finally in Jesus' time, the Romans. For over 800 years, Israel had a variety of countries occupying their land and ruling their people. A lot of the people adjusted. They had to in the difficult conditions under people who had them under their thumb.

The dominate hope among these people seemed to be that when the Messiah that they hoped for came, he would be a warrior king in the mold of David, and like King David he would put the country together again, he would raise a powerful army and he would drive those hated Romans right out of country once and for all.

Now to Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth about this time was getting a lot of press, a lot of attention and there were whispers among those of his people that followed him that they were hoping for and praying for. And his credentials added fuel to the glowing embers of that hope. Surely the people that gathered on the streets of Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, which we celebrate today, they came to hail the future king of Israel. The Messiah they thought, the Messiah, the savior of the nation, the one who would drive out the hated Romans. He would return them to the golden age of King David, and they shouted Hosanna, Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Now the opening verses of the passion story which follows right on the coat tails of today gospel lesson we hear that Judas conspired with the priest to betray Jesus. Judas is going to get a lot of negative press this coming week, but why? We know because in the scriptures we are told that Judas is the one that betrayed Jesus, he is the one that made it possible for the enemies to carry out their plan. But I wonder, have you ever sat back and thought as I have, how in the world a person like Judas could do such a thing? What kind of a person could live with Jesus and learn from Jesus for 3 whole years, and then turn on him, as the scriptures seem to say.

I have a theory, which I shared with the bible study group the other day, it's not unique to me I am sure, Judas reflected that popular mood that we were speaking of before people of Jesus as that warrior king. He had firsthand experience of Jesus, he had seen his power at work. He was captivated by the charisma of this wonderful leader. But Jesus wasn't making his move fast enough for Judas, this is the theory. Jesus was going to force Jesus hand, when the chips were down, Judas imagined that Jesus would step

forward and make that move and become that Messiah that everyone hoped that he would be.

But Judas saw that this was not going to happen, Judas saw that Jesus was determined to go to the cross as a wholly different person he despaired. He killed himself. No doubt Judas wasn't the only one disappointed and confused by the turn of events which preceded Jesus' crucifixion on the cross.

That is our bridge between Palm Sunday and the somberness of Holy Week. The happiness and cheering at that first Palm Sunday parade, it was shouts of happy people whose misguided understanding of who Jesus really was, He wasn't a warrior king, instead he came to be a servant for each one of us.

And that is where St. Paul's writing in Philippians' comes in here. St. Paul writes that although Jesus was in the form of God, he didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped; instead he emptied himself, taking off in the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings. In human form he humbled himself, and came obedient unto death even death on a cross.

So what are the implications of this Palm Sunday for each of us? First, I think we need to underscore the fact that today is the beginning of Holy Week, the most important week for all of us as Christians. If you have any doubts about that, consider the fact that three of the gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke devote an entire third of their gospel, just to this one week in his life, and John of all people goes even further, he makes the subject of Holy Week over half of his gospel. And so this is the week that truly changed the world.

And a second implication is a personal one I think for each one of us as followers of Jesus. I think it is a call to decision, I think we have to make up our minds, which is hard for us to do sometimes, as Jesus' popularity waned and the cross became more real, the lukewarm followers of Jesus started to fade away as we spoke to the children about how friendship sometimes works. Jesus is beginning to make his move, forcing the hands of those who oppose him. And in that challenging mode, people had to risk following Jesus or they had to fade back in the shadows and be quiet. I think Holy Week is like that. I think it is a call to a greater commitment.

Century's and century's before Joshua challenged the people of Israel as he said in Chapter 24 of Joshua, 'choose this day whom you will serve, in my house we will serve the Lord'. And Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, 'No person can serve two masters' and he calls us to discipleship, it's a time for decision, are we willing to put our lives on the line, or are we going to continue to ride the fence in our walk with Jesus this week?

There is an interesting true story that I will tell you about. There is an elderly gentleman who came to church Sunday after Sunday, and that wasn't in itself unusual, the unique part of the man's worship is that he saw poorly and he heard even more poorly. And yet, Sunday after Sunday he participated as well as he could in the service. And one day a friend of his asked him, why in the world do you bother to come to church, since you can't hear very well and obviously you can't see very well, and you know the man did not hesitate one bit, when he responded. He said I come to church because I just want people to know I walk with Jesus. And so this week is a time of decisions, we have to make up our minds, so may our lives, and may our worship this week leave no doubt in the minds of others, as to who we are as followers of Jesus, and we belong to the love of God and Jesus Christ. And together we say, Amen.