

Palm Sunday 2018
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

**God's love will transform ... to foster reconciliation and healing:
let us give thanks and praise shouting –
Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God.**

The Liturgy of the Palms

- Mark 11:1-11
- or John 12:12-16
- Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

The Liturgy of the Word

- Isaiah 50:4-9a
- Philippians 2:5-11
- Mark 14:1-15:47
- *or* Mark 15:1-39, [40-47]
- Psalm 31:9-16

One of the quirky things about growing-up in a small town are the sport rivalries that exist between neighboring communities. My high-school's rival was from the town of Presque Isle, about a ten-mile drive away. When basketball season rolled around, folks always checked the sport calendar to see when the two rival teams where scheduled to compete against one another. During my high-school years, pep rallies were held before those match-ups in order to build school loyalty and team spirit. The big build-up was all about energizing the crowd and stirring excitement, which is always good for ticket sales to said event. Regardless of how much adrenaline was created before the game, however, you knew that only one team will win, and no matter how good a sportsperson you are,, a loss was often accompanied by disappointment and even anger at times. That's the nature of sports and competition: there are winners and there are losers.

I have never been one to engage with sports on any level – local or otherwise. Matter-of-fact, once I studied sociology, phycology, and communication theory and realized how nationalism is reinforced and sustained through sports and community rituals as well as

various media forms such as cinema and television, I began to take a less than positive view of professional athletics. Not that sports are necessarily a bad thing; simply, they can be used to reinforce less than honorable ideologies. Whatever your take on sports may be, we can't ignore the zero-sum game mentality, where the winner takes all and vanquishes the opponent to obscurity, that permeates our current culture in the U.S.. Pep-rallies, pre-game and half-time shows are all good and fine, used as they often are to heighten a competitive spirit, but they can also be used to stoke a negative communal response or group-think.

Jesus was the scrappy underdog; the one who stood up to the powers that be. He spoke to the disenfranchised, empowered the marginalized, healed the broken in spirit. Jesus even ate with outcasts and degenerates. He was a game changer, for sure. Jesus' opponent was the establishment – both religious and secular – with their orderly rules and regulations that kept society from descending into anarchy. But the establishment was also very repressive in numerous ways, subjugating the social order to temple rule under foreign occupation. The rivalry between Jesus and the establishment promised to be a competitive match-up, and the people were excited.

Like some sport super star, Jesus enters in triumphant style, being hailed as the people's champion, the one who would redress the injustices and unfair practices that have the Jewish people clamoring for salvation. Liberation from the tyranny of Roman oppression was at hand. The religious establishment and its corruption be damn, it's those pesky Romans we want sent away. We want their yoke broken and their ideology and pagan practices removed from the community. The crowd senses that Jesus is more than a simply itinerate preacher. After all, he's done some marvelous and incredible feats: fed thousands, healed cripples, dispelled evil spirits, and even raised his friend Lazarus from death. The people could only imagine what he will do next to the Imperial Roman gentry.

But Jesus had other thoughts. Thoughts the majority of the gather community couldn't imagine, much less fathom the significance of. I am not even sure that we, who know the story's outcome well, truly fathom and comprehend the significance of what Jesus is doing and God is accomplishing through the events we call Holy Week. But they should have known something wasn't quite right when Jesus rode a donkey into town rather than a camel or a horse

drawn chariot. Jesus comes into the throng in humility, which only seems to increase the fervor of the locals who gather to greet him.

“Hosanna,” they shout. “Blessed is the one who saves,” they cry. Like some giant pep-rally, they wave their palm fronds in celebratory fashion expecting a victorious outcome. And once again, expectation lies at the root of their future dismay.

Early in our Lent journey, I spoke of the disciple’s expectations of Jesus. Of how we are just as susceptible as the disciples to unreasonable expectations that we then place and project upon God, upon ourselves, and especially upon each other. On this festival day, we project all our hopes, pin all our expectations on Jesus in anticipation of a victorious outcome. And we, like the disciples, like the gathered throng of revelers, are headed for disappointment.

Jesus has repeatedly warned us that this day would come. He warned us to free ourselves from false desires, from selfish ambition. Time and again, Jesus spoke to us of God’s desire for a restoration of the covenant and for right-relationship. He spoke of God’s plan to heal and mend the people’s brokenness. To pardon and forgive our transgressions and for us to forgive one another as we have been forgiven. That’s God’s promise and it’s accomplished not by foregoing pain and suffering, but by going *through* pain and suffering, which then allows for transformation to occur.

How often do we try to avoid the difficult route? Do we try to avoid discomfort or conflict? How many times do we cling to our cherished privileges and traditions that are often the very source and cause of another’s pain and dismay? Over and over, Jesus has implored us to repent from our self-serving ways and turn to God as the foundational source of compassion and mercy. Yet, we too often get caught up in the excitement of expectations no matter how distorted they may be. Like the crowds on that fateful day waving their palm fronds and shouting their hosannas, we too gravitate towards the pep-rally style religious practices that promise salvation without pain or cost. We envy the mega churches with their praise bands and celebratory atmosphere where their children and youth have plenty of social activities and things by which to keep them entertained. We are not to envy other churches. We are not to be like other faith communities. We are to follow Jesus prepared to pay the cost of discipleship: the cross.

Jesus entered into Jerusalem, walked into the temple after the welcome parade, took a look around and left. The Temple had become a caricature of God's message and glory. It had become a mega-temple filled with opportunities that sought to fulfill religious teaching while providing little substance to nurture the people's faith. It was a bastion of self-glorification that exploited people's vulnerability rather than be a sanctuary for the faithful where hope is given to the downtrodden. In its elaborate practices, the Temple had reduced God's covenant to a legal treatise of right and wrong practices that avoid the true cost of discipleship. Need to make atonement? Sacrifice two turtle-doves. Want forgiveness for paying tribute to Cesar? Sacrifice an ox. Whatever the plight, the temple had a remedy with its own associated ritual. And as a footnote, a portion of all sacrifices and the proceeds of the financial exchange went to the temple elite: the Priests and Pharisees. Is it any wonder that Jesus didn't stay to pray. Instead, he went off with his disciples.

What a fundamental change from the start of that fateful day. What began with hosannas ends with despair. It ends with Jesus imploring God to allow this cup to pass just as the Angel of Death passed over the Israelites on the eve of their liberation from bondage in Egypt striking down the first born in every family that didn't prepare as God instructed. The cost that night in the garden with his followers was unavoidable, and Jesus prepared to meet it with trepidation and faith. There is no escaping pain and sorrow. There is only transformation. Without the cross, there is no Easter. Without pain and suffering how can we know joy and gladness.

I don't believe that God wants nor desires for us to experience the anguish of pain and suffering. What parent, after all, wants to see their child endure such things. Yet, each of us can attest to how those challenges that have scared or devastated us are also formational to our sense of purpose and well-being. In a world where we are allowed to walk apart from God, where evil enters in that space created by our walking separately from God's desire for communion, suffering and pain fills that chasm.

Little did those people who greeted Jesus in celebratory fashion that day, know that the situation would turn into chaos. The crowds went from hosanna to crucify him in a matter of

days. They went from celebration to condemnation and did so almost gleefully. They changed sides, so to speak, and participated in the silencing of God's Chosen One.

In a world where the zero-sum game is the norm, where the winner takes it all and the loser stands small, Jesus' message resounds in triumph. Not because it avoids the perils of life, but faces them in faith, that God's love will transform them in an effort to foster reconciliation and healing. May that love wash over us as we enter into this coming week with our own trepidation and faith that transformation may follow in the wake of our own repentance. Therefore, let us give thanks and praise shouting – Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God.