

Palm Sunday, Year B
Christ and Grace
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Mark 14:1 – 15:47
March 25, 2018 10:30 AM Service

Today is different. Sometimes it takes a stark difference, a complete change in our usual patterns to get our attention. Some of us began our service standing outside in the cold rather than seated inside where it is warmer and more comfortable. Our paraments, or hangings, have changed from purple to red, and we are wearing palm crosses or holding palm fronds. As we move through the service today, notice the music as it changes from triumphant to mournful. And I am preaching before we read the Gospel. While you might think I am confused, it is intentional. Palm Sunday is different, and it begins a week of unexpected happenings in the life of Jesus and the disciples. We will hear the whole story in a few minutes, and it too will be full of changes as we move from Jesus' welcome entry into Jerusalem cheered by a crowd shouting hosanna, to a crowd that all too quickly changes its allegiance and shouts for Jesus to be crucified.

When we are reading a novel or watching a movie and the plot begins to pick up its pace, we realize (and sometimes fear) what is about to happen next. Today's Passion Narrative is like that. Most of us know the story so we are not caught off guard, but try to imagine hearing it for the first time, or imagine experiencing it with the disciples and the crowd. It's like a bad dream when we cannot wake up. Nothing happens the way it was supposed to, but instead everything goes from bad to worse, the whole thing spiraling downward until it hits rock bottom.

In the Passion Narrative today, some of us will read the various parts, but even if we don't all have a speaking part this morning, all of us have a part in this great cosmic drama. So it seems good to take a moment before we hear the story to consider the cast of characters. In doing so we may discover that we all too uncomfortably identify with one or more of them. Do we hear our own denial in Peter? Can we identify with Pilate who chose to satisfy the crowd rather than do the right thing? Do we sometimes find ourselves judging and convicting like the chief priests, scribes, and elders? Do we, like the bystanders, wait to see if Elijah or someone else will take action when help is needed? Maybe we are like the women, who look on from a distance, who no longer have the strength or will to actively follow Jesus.

What stood out for me as I read the narrative earlier this week was the theme of betrayal. Of course whenever we think about betrayal, the first person who comes to mind is Judas. Why did Judas betray Jesus? Was it for 30 pieces of silver because personal wealth was more important to him than the new life Jesus promised? Or perhaps because he hoped to control the events by forcing Jesus to react to the authorities so that the promised kingdom he hoped for would become an immediate reality?

Perhaps we show betrayers so little compassion because we are afraid there is some of Judas within ourselves? Sometimes the sin that is so difficult to forgive in others is the one we struggle against in our own lives. We hate the thought that we might be capable of betraying a trust. But here's the thing I want us to hold in our minds as we hear Gospel today - In Jesus' last hours none of the disciples model perfect faithfulness. This should make us uncomfortable, because the reality is that we all live with the possibility of betrayal. Sooner or later every disciple betrays Jesus.

We will betray him in the workplace when it will cost too much to think like a Christian. We will betray him in our homes when the anger is so great that we hurt those who trust us the most. We will betray him in the sacred commitments we make that we simply cannot keep. We will betray Jesus by our indifference to the poor, by our refusal to love our neighbor and pray for our enemies, and in all the ways we fall asleep rather than stay awake with Christ.

So I invite you to open your hearts to hear the truth this morning. Find yourself in this narrative and acknowledge the truth that you hear. You are invited to return for any of our services in the coming week to more deeply explore why it is that we need a Savior. Holy Week is an essential journey in our faith, as it helps us to see the sin we are capable of and to see the redemption that is ours to receive through the grace and gift of God in his Son Jesus Christ. Because while our story today ends at rock bottom, it is not the end. The Centurion and Joseph of Arimathea will show us in word and action the hope that there is something more powerful than death. Amen.