

Palm Sunday
March 28, 2010
Luke 19:28-40

I did not see the movie *the Passion of the Christ* when it came out several years ago. I know that it was very moving, very powerful for many folks. But I did not see it.

I'm okay in real life emergencies. But I don't do well with blood and gore in movies, and from all I had heard about the movie, I knew that I would spend most of it with my eyes closed. And sometimes having your eyes closed and just hearing the sounds of violence is even worse!

And to be quite honest, I know you don't expect to hear a pastor say this, but I've had trouble over the years with the whole idea of sacrificial atonement, the idea that God demanded a sacrifice of blood for our sin and Jesus was the only one who could do that because he himself was sinless. And I know that the basis for that argument is biblical. But it is *also* biblical to say that God does *not* demand blood sacrifice – it is the sacrifice of our living that God seeks, the way we use our lives and our relationships with God and with each other that are most important. That was the emphasis of the Old Testament prophets and I think you can make the case that that's Paul's chief argument, too.

There is no doubt that the crucifixion was bloody, horrifying, excruciating, gut and soul wrenching business. I once read a doctor's description of what happened to a body that had been crucified, how death progressed and occurred – it was unspeakably horrible.

Why else would we Christians point to Holy Week as the unique set of events that changed the structure of the universe and the relationship between the Holy and Humanity forever? I believe it is because the crucifixion was, in fact, an act of non-violent atonement: It was God reaching out to prevent death and violence from having full control of the creation God loves.

And it all begins with Palm Sunday. It was the week before Passover and the Jews, who have been unhappy with their Roman rulers for some time now, are about to celebrate their great festival of Liberation and Freedom. A few years earlier riots had broken out at Passover. Jews threw stones at Roman soldiers and 3000 Jews had been massacred in the Temple. Now, if you were Pilate, what would you do?

Well, if I were in charge, I'd start bringing in troops from the West, from Rome. I'd have shields shining so brightly the sun shining on them would blind those superstitious Palestinians. I'd bring in every war horse and chariot from the five

closest provinces to remind them that we Romans have the power and we are in charge, and if they even so much as *think* of rebelling, they're all dead men.

Now, in contrast to this parade of military might and implicit violence, Jesus holds a little parade of his own, coming in from the East. He comes from the Mount of Olives, where tradition held that the Messiah would appear – and he's making reference to both the messianic prophecies of Zechariah and the Roman army when he rides in on his little donkey. Palm Sunday isn't so much a parade of triumph as it is a Monty Pythonesque mocking of the Roman authorities AND the Jewish expectations of a messiah, because the people would gladly have just put Jesus at the head of that Roman column. Jesus is deliberately showing them in the most ridiculous way possible that God has a different idea, a better way, a rule of love and NOT power or violence, a rule which embraces and reigns through an invitation to life and not the threat of death.

Think about it! Where I served in Norwich, NY, each year on Palm Sunday we hold a procession through town, beginning at the UCC church, stopping at the Baptist Church, then on to the Methodist church where those congregations worship together. The clergy carry crosses and when I was first there one led a donkey on the walk. But the owner of the donkey moved and we wound up with a pony, and this year they're using a miniature horse. But think about it. If Jesus rode a foal (which is an animal under one year old) or even the colt of a donkey, it was a fairly small animal for a grown man to ride. He would have looked kind of like the Shriners on those mini-motorbikes. And it was certainly no comparison to a fully dressed warrior on a battle stallion!

And of course, he's doing it just as Rome is flexing its muscles! No wonder the Scribes want him to shut people up! Those Romans mean business! But knowing what the likely outcome of his ministry will be (after all, his cousin John the Baptist has lost his head messing with politics), Jesus enters a potentially deadly situation with no posse, no protection, no force.¹ He is provocative and intentionally vulnerable, because ***that is how God reaches out to us.***

The power of the crucifixion is NOT about appeasing the blood lust of some angry God. That would make God like any number of petty deities throughout the ancient world. It is about the God who sacrifices himself for us, God risking it all so that we might have life, God moving heaven and earth to free us from the power and rule of fear and death and the fear of death, so that we might seek, know, and understand the things that make for peace.

If we only go from the joyful cries of Palm Sunday to the Alleluia proclamations of Easter Sunday, we will only see a parody of joy, a mocking version of what it

¹ William G. Carter, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Volume 2 (2009), p. 156

means to follow and trust Christ. This week, take time to attend a special service, or at least read the passages that speak of Jesus' last week on earth, but listen and read from this perspective: not that they tell of God exacting punishment for our sin, but of the force and fury of the World seeking to hold sway against God's way of mercy, forgiveness, steadfast love, healing, wholeness, joy. And they tell how Jesus met that violence: with peace, forgiveness, and trust in God, rejecting any form of violence in response.

By doing that he changed what it means to be a human being who chooses to live in the image of God. To love our enemies. To be *for* the Other. Being a disciple isn't about being "good." It's about being human in a different way, in Jesus way.

The cross becomes the means of atonement and reconciliation NOT because God required it, but because we did, the crowd did. Jesus asks God to forgive us *before* he died.² Sam Wells says, "The cross is what happens when unending love becomes bonded to human nature and imagination that can't tolerate it. The cross is humanity's allergic reaction to the love of God."³

There is a story of a Roman soldier who came to believe that Jesus was the Savior. And as he went to be baptized he held his right arm out of the water and refused to let it get wet because "that is my killing arm. It belongs to Caesar, and I can't offer it to God." What do we hold back from our discipleship? What parts of our lives do we want to keep in the world of violence, the world of punishment, the world of fear and death? What does it require for us to risk giving them to God, who has given us everything in Christ?

² Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell in a presentation to the Boston Theological Circle, December 2009.

³ Sam Wells, "Sacrificing War"; *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2008, p. 42.