

“The Paradox of Palms to Passion”
Based on Jn. 12 and Mt 27
Preached on Mar. 24, 2024 – Palm/Passion Sunday\

Sunday, Passion Sunday. Which do you prefer? Shouts of “Hosanna!” or “Crucify Him!” I grew up with Palm Sunday. I loved Palm Sunday. The images of Jesus riding on a donkey, people throwing their coats on the road to welcome Him as a king. Palm fronds. You got to take them home and hang them behind a cross on the wall or fold them up into crosses. Palms are a symbol of celebration. One view of heaven has everyone waving palm branches.

Passion Sunday is a bit rougher than Palm Sunday. There is betrayal, denial, arrest, trials, beatings, mockery, the crucifixion. Not fun stuff. In fact, it would be stuff you’d rather forget, except that the Gospel won’t let you. The palms lead to the passion. The donkey leads to the cross. The Hosannas lead to the silence of the tomb. Just as you can’t have Easter Sunday without Good Friday, so you can’t have Palm Sunday without Passion Sunday.

It’s a collision of two agendas, two kingdoms, two crowds and two messiahs. On the one hand is Barrabas, an insurrectionist, a terrorist, whose name means “son of the father,” which just heightens the contrast. Barabbas, son of the father, and Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Father. Barabbas was a revolutionary. A terrorist. A messianic hopeful. He was one of many who attempted to form an army to overthrow Roman rule and restore the throne of King David to Israel. He wasn’t the first, and he wouldn’t be the last.

Barabbas wasn’t a raving madman. He was cold, calculating, inspiring, persuasive patriot. You have to be these things in order to be a revolutionary. You need to be able to organize and mobilize and inspire. You need to get people whipped up into such a frenzy that they are willing to die for the cause. The two “thieves” who were crucified with Jesus were probably co-conspirators with Barrabas. Cross number three, in all likelihood, had his name on it. (They weren’t much into long trials and endless legal appeals in those days.) In fact, those three crucifixions were probably already on Pilate’s Friday Passover docket until Jesus showed up at the door with a mob behind Him.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem riding a donkey, He was intentionally pushing on all the messianic buttons. David rode a donkey into battle. We heard the prophet Zechariah promise the messiah would ride on a donkey. The shouts of Hosanna, the coats on the road, the waving of branches, these were all the trappings of messiah – King David riding in majesty to reclaim his city for the kingdom of God. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” The crowd was ready, it was excited, it was mobilized, it was likely armed and dangerous. Even Jesus’ disciples had a couple of swords tucked in their tunics, and Peter even used one in a clumsy attempt to defend Jesus in the garden.

The point is that Jesus intentionally and knowingly rode into a hotbed of insurrection and intrigue. He knew they were plotting to kill Him. He knew that Jerusalem was boiling over with anticipation. He knew Barabbas and his followers were waiting for their execution. He knew the religious leaders were conspiring against Him. He knew Pilate would do anything to keep a Passover riot from happening, including turning loose a known terrorist. He knew all this, and yet He did it.

For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross and scorned its shame. For the joy of your salvation, Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to death on a cross. For the joy of rescuing the world from Sin and Death Jesus rode into this drama knowing full well its outcome, knowing that the Scriptures had to be fulfilled, knowing that this was the eternal plan and the will of His Father, that He the Son should bear humanity's rebellion and death in His own body.

There's this incredible thread of blood that runs through the Passion story. It begins on the fateful night of Jesus' betrayal at the hand of Judas, one of His own. Jesus takes the cup and gives it to each of His disciples. "This cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." The covenant in which God forgives sin and remembers iniquity no more. He gives them His blood as wine to drink and so binds them in a covenant of blood. They are bound to His death and He to theirs. Later, Judas sees the outcome of Jesus' arrest and repents of his betrayal. He recognizes his error. Perhaps Judas was expecting Jesus to start a revolution like Barabbas and was trying to hurry things along on his timetable. Haven't we all tried to hurry God along at one point or another?

He takes the thirty silver pieces back to the temple. "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood," he says. He wants to be cleared of the blood of Jesus, but the priests have no absolution to offer him. "What is that to us?" they say. "That's your problem." Judas takes the thirty silver pieces and throws them into the temple treasury and goes and hangs himself in despair. If only he had come back to Jesus! The priests can't keep the money because it's "blood money" so they buy the Field of Blood as a burial place for all the Jane and John Does of Jerusalem.

Pilate washes his hands at Jesus' trial and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood. He's your problem." And the crowd, a pro-Barabbas mob who clamored for the crucifixion of Jesus and the release of their hero says, "Let His blood be on us and on our children." They say it in derision and mockery, the way this world always does when it comes to Jesus, but they speak a great and profound truth. His blood must be upon you and upon your children if you are to be saved.

That's the difference between Barabbas, son of the father, and Jesus the Christ, the Son of God the Father. The blood of Barabbas cannot save you. In fact, he wants your blood to save him. He wants you to die for the cause. He wants you to save the world by your own efforts. He wants you to take up arms with him and die with him on the battlefield. But Jesus the Christ, the one who rides on a borrowed donkey, the one who has thorns for a crown, dies for you. He sheds His blood for you. He offers His life in place of your life. He offers His blood for the sin of the world, the redemption price of our slavery, the liberation from our "fields of blood," our resurrection from the grave, our washing from sin in Baptism by which His blood is upon us and upon our children.

Barabbas isn't alone. There is Peter the denier, quick to speak, courageous with the sword, afraid to be associated with Jesus and confess Him to a servant girl. There is Judas the traitor. His idea of a messiah was not what Jesus was there to deliver. His repentance didn't bring him back to Jesus but to death by his own hand. There are the politicians, the schemers, Pilate the Roman governor who let himself be pushed around by a mob. Caiaphas, the politically appointed high priest, who himself conducted a sham trial. Barabbas, the murderer, who gets off scotch-free at Jesus' expense. The two thieves crucified with Jesus. Simon of Cyrene, an out-of-town pilgrim who is there to celebrate Passover and is forced to carry the cross of his Savior. The soldiers on duty. The crowds who mock. The women who stand by faithfully. The disciples who scatter in fear.

The passion is a rich narrative of characters of all sorts, and we are all of them. From Peter the denier to Judas the betrayer to Barabbas the terrorist to Pilate the man who is just trying to keep the peace and his job. We are like each of them, faithful and faithless, confessing and denying, taking the practical way out, openly shaking our fist in rebellion against the reign of God. But's here the point, that in an even greater sense, Jesus is all of them and all of us. "He became Sin who knew no sin," Paul writes. He became our Sin. He became all of it – the denier, the rebel, the betrayer, the thief, the murderer, the insurrectionist, the opportunist, the crooked politician – He became humanity's Sin. The world threw its worst at Jesus. All that we do to each other, all that others do to us, the worst of our inhumanity came to bear on Jesus. And He absorbed it all, becoming our Sin so that in Him we might become His righteousness.

We sinner-saints are part of both crowds, the pro-Jesus crowd and the pro-Barabbas crowd. One crowd waves palm branches; the other brandishes swords and weapons. We wave our palms and sing our Hosannas on Sunday but on Monday it's back to business as usual in a dog eat dog world where Barabbas the alpha dog is admired for getting the job done. This world has little use for beggar kings riding donkeys. And yet all the blood shed by the Barabbases of this world in holy war and jihad, for righteous causes and for love of country and patriotism, all that blood cannot bring peace, righteousness, or life. There is no end to the war with Barabbas. Even if he wins, he must still wield the sword to defend what he's won.

Look to beggar King Jesus and His cross. Follow the path of sorrows He walks alone to save you. Hail Him with your palm branches and then like Simon of Cyrene, take up your cross and follow Him. He will lead in the paths of righteousness. He will lead you through the dark valley of Death and the grave to life eternal. Barabbas and his sword cannot save you. Jesus and His cross has saved you.

Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord. May His blood be upon us and upon our children! In the Name of Jesus, Amen.