

Entering the Inevitable
Palm Sunday, 2010 (March 28)
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 19: 28-40

If there were only one word for Palm Sunday, it would be conflict.

As we did this morning, we wave our palms and reenact the parade, Christ's glorious entry into Jerusalem. It's impossible not to feel the joy and victory of the moment. But in virtually the same second, we are reminded of the grim events to come.

The day drips with other signs of contrast and contradiction. There is the image of Christ the King, truly human, truly divine, the only perfect being, hailed as a conqueror, riding on a dumpy donkey.

And then there is the tension that must have filled the air in the city of David that Passover. As Christ led a peaceful parade, Pontius Pilate and the Roman army staged their own parade into town that day – to send the signal that any trouble-makers would be dealt with. It was the ultimate clash of church and state.

Victory and loss. Celebration and sorrow. Christ's believers' ecstatic expectation that the Messiah was about to set the world right in a blazing triumph of justice and peace ... opposed by Christ's own inner awareness of the agony to come in the days ahead. The shouts of the fickle crowd - "Alleluia!" one day, "Crucify him!" the next.

Then comes Christ's lonely, gut-wrenching night in the Garden of Gethsemene, even as his closest friends dosed off in oblivion. (Come back for more on that Thursday night.) Finally, we reach the cross, which would forever thereafter symbolize, at once, agony and triumph.

Contrast, contradiction, conflict.

Jerusalem was caught in the middle - between extremes in that first Passion week and how many times have we seen humanity at its worst when it clings to extremes? Look no further than this week, when the losers in the healthcare debate have hurled racist insults at lawmakers, threatened them and vandalized their offices. In politics or capitalism, may God hasten the day when we as a society can embrace the wisdom of the middle way.

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We call this the week of the Passion. All emotions can be felt with the power of passion – anger and joy, regret and love. But the term the “passion” is used to describe the events of Holy Week to orient us in particular to Christ’s suffering – physical, mental and spiritual. The Greek word for suffering is *pasch* and the Latin is *passio*. So you can see where “passion” comes from.

But that week in Jerusalem started with the opposite. It started with embarrassing praise.

As Christ rode in on the donkey, Luke writes,

“... the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the Pharisees there said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

The crowd at the parade that day was not the first of God’s people to show extravagant praise. King David danced in his loincloth. Mary sang the magnificat when she received the news that she would give birth to the messiah. On Pentecost, believers chattered in every tongue on earth.

Last December, your Guatemala mission team caught a glimpse of this dramatized in the streets of Antigua. As part of a Christmas festival in the ancient city, a man dressed as one of the wise men rode up and down the street, joyfully shouting the news of the baby’s birth. He spoke in Spanish but his elation was clear, even for us non-Spanish speakers.

Today’s culture, however, looks askance at that kind of behavior. For years at the corner of Trade and Tryon uptown, a street preacher in jeans and cowboy boots used a microphone and an amplifier to shout out the Gospel. Bankers in suits walked by, feeling awkward if not annoyed, trying to pretend they didn’t see or hear him. In my former life in those years, my office happened to overlook that same corner. Even though I was 18 floors up, I caught every word. He had a good amplifier. And he was

not at all embarrassed. It might not have been my approach to evangelism, but I admired his conviction.

It's often the same way when people try to share the word of God one on one. In Charlotte, it's not uncommon to see people 'say grace' in a public restaurant. That's acceptable. But don't try to engage a stranger in a little chit-chat about God – unless you're really just trying to get them to turn and walk away, because that's mostly likely going to be the response.

That's even the way it is most often in God's house – especially when it says Presbyterian on the sign out front. The frozen chosen, sitting upright and proper in their pews. Eyes forward, feet on the ground. Not here, necessarily, but most places. It would be embarrassing to shout "amen" or express appreciation in applause. Not here, but most places. One of the great questions facing our denomination is how we conduct worship – what's sacred and what's not. It will be interesting to see whether we as a denominational family thaw out a bit in the coming years – even if it's embarrassing at first.

Embarrassment was not on the minds of the parade watchers that day in Jerusalem, however. Perhaps it was a little like the St. Patrick's Day parade my family took in while on vacation in Charleston two week ago. Everyone on the streets there was wearing green, finding their inner Irish and generally getting caught up in the moment. The parade was late in the morning on a Wednesday and it was clear that not much work would get done that day. Perhaps, like that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, people were swept up in religious fervor and wanted to take the day to honor the ministry of St. Patrick. Perhaps. But I bet it had more to do with the fact that the bars and restaurants opened at 11 a.m. and the green beer was flowing before the parade was even over.

That day in Jerusalem, however, Jesus' followers were more sincere. They couldn't contain their excitement. The messiah had come and, they thought, soon, very soon, the worldly influence that controlled the riches of the land would be toppled, the power made low and common men and women raised up.

Maybe the Pharisees were irritated by all the shouting and cavorting. Maybe they just wanted to avoid trouble. Either way, the Pharisees told Jesus: "Order your people to quiet down." Scripture doesn't indicate that Jesus chuckled to himself. But Christ knew the Pharisees' desire for decency and order that day was in vain.

"If these people were silent," Christ calmly told the officials, "then even the stones would shout out."

It's inevitable, Christ was saying. We have entered the inevitable. We have passed the point of no return. You Pharisees, these followers of the mine, these onlookers, Pontius Pilate, his imperial Roman guard brandishing its military might, we are all caught up in something far larger than any one of us. It can't be stopped, Christ was saying. Don't even try.

On some level, surely Christ knew what lay ahead – the abandonment, the betrayal, the ridicule, the loneliness. He knew Pilate would do what politicians do, wash his hands of the trouble and save his own hide. He knew Judas would betray him. He knew his disciples, who so often didn't get it, would continue not getting the truth of his identity. Had we been there, we would have done no better.

Christ knew that our faith can waiver. He knew we can hide our praise behind our embarrassment or shrink into cowardice. But he also knew that God's will wins out. So, he told the Pharisees, if these people were to fall silent, then the stones would shout out in praise of God's inevitable victory.

The poet Ann Weems captured that particular conflict of God's will and purpose with humanity's waywardness in this work, appropriately titled, *For Love of Bethlehem, For Fear of Jerusalem*, printed on the cover of your bulletin:

Just when we were beginning
 to enjoy the play,
the stagehands came out
 and dismantled the manger.
From its wood, they built a cross.
What kind of drama is this anyway?

The happy ending wasn't
 an ending after all,
 but just Act I.

Before the play is over,
 most of the audience has left,
but the Director goes on,
 content with the remnant
to whom is promised
 a smashing finale.

Shall we, too, go home early –
 before we get stuck in the traffic?
We can always read
 what the critics have to say,
and if it's really good,
 we can be assured
 it will be repeated.

* * *

Christ knew the fickle spirit that we hear in that last verse, as the poem asks if we should slip out early because the play is not going to end the way we'd planned. Christ experienced it many times.

So, he assured the Pharisees, the stones would shout out if needed.

It's an image that, excuse the pun, speaks loudly. Stones crying out. Christ could not have picked a more elemental metaphor. Stones, ancient, unchanging and unmoving. Stones that witnessed the passage of the millennia without so much as a peep. The coming and going of life, from the first organism that grew legs and crawled out of the muck to the reign of the dinosaurs to the ice age. These particular stones that had already witnessed Jerusalem's construction, destruction and reconstruction. If needed, these very stones would bellow from where they lay to herald the inevitable, unstoppable news that a new era was about to be ushered in.

As he did so many times, Christ is quoting scripture. The prophet Habakkuk foretold the day when justice would prevail and the stones that had been pressed into service to build the corrupt house of humanity would cry out in defiance. Christ also knew that his predecessor and fellow rabble rouser John the Baptist had used the same idea when he said that God is able to raise up children of Abraham from stones, if that is what it took to prevail over the broken and fickle ways of humanity.

That, friends, is the inevitable truth of Holy Week. Whether we lead the parade and have to be told to quiet down or whether we slink back into the corners to avoid being linked to the hubbub, the truth of God's love is bigger than our embarrassing praise or meek self-consciousness. God's love in Christ Jesus doesn't depend on whether we shout "Alleluia" or "Crucify him." God's love for us is that inevitable.

We may use other lofty ways to express it – theological concepts such as the sovereignty of God or predestination. But the shout of the stones says the same thing – nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God. It is inevitable.

For that love, God came into the world in Jesus Christ. For that love, God in Christ experienced every aspect of the human endeavor, the agony and the victory and everything in between.

As we go through our own days, how quickly and even thoughtlessly do we move through our emotions – our annoyance in traffic, our disappointment with co-workers, our impatience with family members. In one hour, we feel fatigue from a busy day, the next hour we may feel that we did not accomplish much. One hour, we want nothing more than to be alone. The next, we yearn to be with family or friends.

For all of this, Christ lived and walked as one of us and so many of these emotions were part of the Passion week for him. As we go through the days and hours of our Passion week this week, we can strive to feel more deeply, reflect more sincerely on what it is to be alive and take solace that Christ knows our every emotion. Yet, when it was time to empty himself and take our place on the cross, he did so.

On this Palm Sunday, we can be as confident as Christ was when he entered the inevitable that God's love would prevail ... above Christ's suffering then – and ours today, above Christ's hesitance and uncertainty that week – and ours now, above the best and the worst that humanity could muster then and still today.

The inevitable, irreversible, unstoppable truth of Holy Week is the greatest contradiction of them all. In Christ's death we are given life.

So, rather than trying to beat the traffic, let's stick around, you and me, to see the end of the play.

Amen.

