

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday / April 9, 2017

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Palm Sunday is a day full of paradox. One would expect the cheers for Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem would lead to victory not defeat, the shouts of "Hosanna" to depict a mighty God not a merciful and humble God. The paradox is the contradiction inherent in the episodes of Palm Sunday and the deeper truths that we access by holding that contradiction together. Paradox may in fact be the only way that we can understand God who is so dynamic that no fixed boundaries can do God justice. So God is like a mighty sovereign who humbly rides a donkey. God is the living One who is entombed. Adam and Eve fell in a garden and it is in a garden that God raised his Son to life, and by so doing raised Adam and Eve and all of fallen humanity. There are some deep truths in the contradictions of this day.

We expect the powerful to exercise force against the weak. A crowd emboldened by swords and clubs arrest Jesus depleted after an anguished night of prayer. His disciples flee. Pilate releases a notorious prisoner and imprisons the innocent Son of man. We expect a corrupt governor to do no less. Undisciplined soldiers play with their new prisoner, mock and beat him. Simon is forced to carry the heavy crossbeam on which Jesus, too injured to carry it himself, will be crucified. We are no strangers to brute force. We have seen it play out upon innocent families struck down by sarin gas in Syria. In some sense this is what we expect from Pontius Pilate and others like Bashar al-Assad who rely on the power they hold over others.

Above this, the question we are left with is where is God? What can we learn from the paradox of Palm Sunday? God is among the weak, sustaining the weary with a word, as Isaiah said. God is with those gasping for breath imparting the breath of life even to those whose lives were lost. This is no

fantastic escapism. Rather, it is facing into the pain. “I have set my face like flint,” Isaiah declared. Then, in a place of exile he asserts the One who vindicates me is near.

I had lunch this week with a friend of mine I hadn’t seen in years. She’s a Jewish mother about my age. Of course it is hard not to think of Mary this week who was also a Jewish mother. Both had known loss. My friend lost her husband in a traffic accident about twenty years ago. In the last three years, she lost two of her three children both in their thirties. Her daughter died from a virulent infection, her son died in his sleep. Now you might think this person would be bitter, and there are certainly days when she cries. But paradoxically to those who say her loved ones have been plucked from her, she replies, no, they were gifted to me, to know and to love and to remember. The world is a better place for them having lived. She has turned the narrative around from loss to life, from bitterness to gratitude.

This too is the paradox of Palm Sunday. The chief priests, the scribes and elders laughed at the paradox, “He saved others; he cannot save himself.” No, he did not save himself, he gave of himself in love for the life of others. That’s what it means to walk in the way of the cross. Our stone altar is engraved with the words “Whosoever would save his life shall lose it – whosoever shall lose his life shall find it.” The paradox is that Jesus did not save himself, instead he gave of himself and found life.

Palm Sunday also teaches us that no matter who we are there is a dwelling place in our Father’s house. Or, “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” in the expansive words of the King James Bible. Jesus made this statement right after predicting that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crows. And now at the passion of Palm Sunday that is where we are. The cock has crowed and Peter is weeping bitterly over his denials. Still, paradoxically Palm Sunday offers this word of hope: Peter, in my Father’s house there are many mansions. There is a place for you.

Amen.