

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
Sermon for March 16, 2008
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Matthew 21:1-11
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

There's something confusing about this practice of waving palms and then crying "crucify him" – all on the same day. It wasn't always so.

Once upon a time when most people attended all the church services during Holy Week, this would have been just Palm Sunday. In those days we would have begun and ended with Palm Sunday – the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. And I'd be able to reflect on the journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

The following days of Holy Week would progress through the cleansing of the temple to the plots against Jesus and end with the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and the Crucifixion on Good Friday.

However, most of us don't go to church every day during Holy Week – so to make sure the crucifixion is experienced Good Friday is squashed into Palm Sunday. So we get procession and passion today.

There will be a difference for those of you who attend Good Friday at the end of the week. Today we read the Passion according to the Gospel of Matthew. This Friday we will experience the Passion according to the Gospel of John. And there is a marked difference between the two Gospels.

Today we live with the Passion of our Lord according to Matthew. Now "Passion" is not what you think of when I usually say something with "passion". The Passion here is rooted in the word Pascha, the root of the word we use for the Paschal Candle. Pascha refers to the Passover of the Hebrews: when the angel of the Lord passed over the houses of the Hebrews in Egypt and afflicted the homes of the Egyptians by taking the lives of the first born sons. The Passover of the Lord is the story of Jesus moving through the trials to the crucifixion to his death on the cross, when Jesus passed over from this life.

To avoid confusion, I suppose we should call this "the suffering of our Lord". Because it is about suffering, and often we relate our own suffering to that of Jesus.

When I was a chaplain at Presbyterian Hospital, I remember one of my cancer patients often would talk about being able to suffer anything because Jesus suffered so much. Her pain drew her closer to her savior.

But that isn't true for everyone. Another of those I prayed with, would complain about the pain, and questioned the need for any suffering. And then would come the inevitable indictment: How can a loving God allow suffering? How could the Heavenly Father sentence his son to die on the cross?

I don't know the answer to the first question. It's a mystery to me to explain suffering in the world. Any explanation that I can come up with rings hollow and shallow in the face of actual suffering.

The second question is no more easy, but there the answer depends on which Gospel you ask. Matthew sees the real pain of the cross and expresses it in the agony that Jesus feels as he prepares to face what lies ahead.

Christian theology talks about the crucifixion as atonement for the sins of the world. Each week we celebrate the Eucharist and say words that repeat that theme: that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins.

This idea of a “blood atonement” – that blood must be shed to pay for sins – comes from the Jewish tradition of sacrifice. Animal blood was sprinkled on the altar as a “sin offering” to ask God to forgive the sins of the people. Christianity adopted that tradition in trying to understand the nature of the Crucifixion.

This is called “blood atonement.” This idea of a blood atonement was troubling to our midweek Bible Study group. It’s been troubling to me. How can a loving father kill his son?

The alternative to the blood of the Cross for many people is a desire to separate Good Friday from Easter Sunday – to get rid of the cross and embrace the empty tomb. That’s a problem because you cannot have the Resurrection without the Crucifixion. They are not separate events – from the last supper, the betrayal, the trial, the crucifixion, the time with death in the tomb, the resurrection – are all one event. They are a continuum, each dependent on the others.

We must embrace the crucifixion to embrace the resurrection. We all, each and every one of us, had we been in that courtyard, would have called out “crucify him.” We humans killed him. The Heavenly Father raised him up. But many theologians do not see Jesus’ death on the cross as the atonement.

There’s another theory of atonement that is less sanguine. It’s rooted in the verses of Paul’s letter we read today. “Jesus emptied himself.” In Greek the word for empty is kenosis. The meaning is not just to empty, but to strip away the self, the ego, to open oneself up to be filled. In the case of Jesus, Paul sees Jesus emptying himself to be filled with the will of God the Father.

In this case atonement can be viewed as something different. Break the word apart and it becomes AT-ONE-MENT. Jesus atoned for the world by become AT ONE with God. And by doing so he gave us an example of how to live our lives: to let go of what we want, what we desire, to open ourselves up to what God would desire for us.

We are asked to atone for our lives by becoming at one with God. It isn’t easy. Becoming at one with God means looking out for others and not just ourselves. It means caring as much for others as we do ourselves.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him would never die, but would have everlasting life.

Amen