

March 25, 2018 – Palm/Passion Sunday
“At the Crossroads”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
March 11:1-11, 14:1-15:47

This Sunday, more than any other in our liturgical year, is filled with irony. If you had time to peer into the icon of Jesus that I had printed in your bulletin today, you may have already experienced that visually. Jesus, from one perspective, is seemingly staring into space – with his “eyes toward Jerusalem – as the scriptures denote. From another perspective he is seen riding on a donkey with those nearby holding palm branches. We can almost hear their Hosanna’s (which literally means “God save us!”) as he rides closer and closer to his imminent death.

It’s the reason I wanted to read the entire passion narrative today – in order that we might also hear the irony of Jesus’ triumphal entry (as it is referred) juxtaposed against his final days. Truly this was his experience of life at the crossroads.

It’s easy to overlook the dilemma faced by Jesus on this day of celebration, but it is important to recognize the tension he faced as we move into what we call Holy Week. For most of us it is a week to be avoided. Rather than face the final meal with his disciples, the loneliness of Gethsemane, and the scandal of the cross, we wave our palm branches this Sunday in festal preparation for lilies, brass, and affirmations of the resurrection next week. But I want to invite you into a deeper sense of reality – if only for these few minutes. I’d also like you to consider the radical nature of what Jesus was doing as he made his way to Jerusalem at this time in his life.

It was here that he put a stake in the ground from which there was no turning back. He had already amassed quite a following through preaching, teaching, healing, and continually insisting that those formerly marginalized be brought into center and given a voice. It was likely those followers who went before him as he made his way to Jerusalem laying down branches and blankets with shouts of pleading joy. Save us! Blessed are you who comes in God’s name. Lord save us!

To top it off he rode in not on a horse – which one would expect of a “real king.” Jesus rode, instead, on a beast of burden – not only of low estate but low to the ground where followers could touch him in their pleading and as they praised him.

It was Jesus’ ultimate mockery of the well-ensconced secular and sacred powers as the Jewish High Priests and Roman Prelates and Governor wrung their hands and shook their heads frightfully wondering how in the world they were going to deal with this guy. Once again, he had beat them at their own game. By not acquiescing to their tactics or attempting to grab power as THEY were accustomed to doing. He took the humble road and thereby realized an even higher source of power. By being true to self and listening to God’s plan for his life, he achieved an even larger following – at least for the time being – a following that he knew was only temporary.

And so that paradox depicted in the picture is accurate, I believe. Despite all the adulation – the joyful celebration – the eager anticipation by those waving palm branches, Jesus looks knowingly toward the future. He is at the crossroads and knows full well what that means and what that portends as his fate is sealed. And that's why it is important to hear the full story on this day as we save the glorious ending for next week.

I think it also invites us to consider where we are in our relationship to God – and to one another as we, too, stand at similar crossroads in our lives - as does our nation and world.

Are we waving palm branches, like the crowds in Jerusalem – full of enthusiasm – solid in our faith – only to realize just how fickle it is when the going gets tough?

Will we, like Peter, deny him when we are most needed to speak a word of truth to power in a society where many are subject to injustice because they have no voice or privilege?

Or will we be more eager to profit, like Judas, from seductive opportunities rather than remain faithful to the path that we once affirmed as truth?

Or will we simply fall asleep, like those in the garden, unable to face the struggles right in front of us? (Pause)

Yesterday I stood with members of our congregation and those of our San Diego Partnership churches at the latest rally “The March for Our Lives.” I’ve been to too many such rallies in the past year but this one and it’s coverage in other cities really struck my heart. Totally organized and run by those under 18 years of age, this one had a different punch.

I got separated from our group during the March and took the opportunity to ponder as I observed fellow marchers and listened to passionate chants. What WILL come of this I wondered to myself? Will it all be forgotten in a few weeks? Will the politicians divert the whole thing in opportunistic rhetoric and anemic bills that go nowhere as they bow once again to the lobbying power of the NRA?

When I got home I turned in the television hoping to watch coverage of marches throughout the US. News commentators were busy interviewing folks repeatedly asking the youth “What next? What will happen tomorrow?” For some reason I became increasingly frustrated by the question though I wondered the same.

Then I saw and listened to the speech by Emma Gonzales which she gave at our nation’s capital. Her words were stirring and then she was silent. For more than 4 minutes. The crowd was uncomfortable - shouting out calls of support - but she held her position. She remained silent and thereby held us all in the discomfort of the present - our crossroads.

Then it dawned on me. Tomorrow WILL come - but what we need to focus on is this present moment. We need to focus on the crossroads where we stand right here - right now. In the prolonged silence Emma Gonzales reminded us of that and demanded that we pause and pay attention.

Jesus invites us to do the same. He knew this moment would not last forever. He longed for his disciples to stop, listen, see, and respond with courage and compassion.

I believe we stand such a crossroads today - not only in our journey of Holy Week, but in our call to faithful witnesses to the Prince of Peace. We, too, stand at the crossroads at a troubled time in our nation's history. It is up to each one of us to decide how we will respond. Perhaps we, too, need a little silence to call our attention to the importance of this present moment AND to guide our path. Will you enter into prayer with me - for our nation and all lives that want to call it home?

Silence