

“Love Marches On”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Palm Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 25, 2018

John 12:12-27

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

John 19:16b-22

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

And so, we find ourselves here, after the parade. Palm fronds litter the floor and the steps in front. No longer held up and waving, but following the facts of gravity and now come down to earth. The excitement has passed some by this point, like it did after that high theatrical moment of spectacle when people lined the highways and byways of Jerusalem with a pointed public purpose. It had been a moment of daring clarity and solidarity: the throngs of Jerusalem come together to cry out “Hosanna—save us!” and praise “the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the king of Israel.” Here came Jesus through their midst, riding on a small donkey, in just the way Scripture foretold that Israel’s messiah would come. For good measure and to hail Jesus’ entry, they waved palm fronds—a symbol of victory throughout the ancient world. Here at last was the one to overthrow oppressive Rome, to restore righteous faith, and to set everything right. Anything seemed possible!

The spectacle that day was not so different from yesterday, come to think of it. Children from schools across the country—even the world!—poured into the streets with their families and other supportive adults. They waved signs like palm fronds, and chanted slogans demanding safety. They stepped to

microphones everywhere to call for deliverance from gun violence in schools, from the disproportionate slayings of black and brown kids, and from callous legislative inaction. To see the news, watch clips online, and read stories afterwards is to be astonished at their clarity, their bravery and their hope. And afterward I imagine the green spaces and assembly points from Washington DC to Saint Paul to San Francisco now look a bit like this, littered with the aftermath of clamorous public assembly. Leftover reminders that anything seemed possible.

But now what? After the mountaintop, what comes next? When reality sets in, those who march in these parades go home and start to wonder. What good are palm leaves in the face of Rome's military might? What good are children marching in the face of corrupt politicians and all the money of those who buy their votes? I confess to a cynicism and fear in the pit of my stomach, because massive rallies and witty signs are only part of how change comes. There must be harder work that continues for months and years out of the spotlight: building coalitions around these moral values and changing access to money and votes (the only levers of power that politicians truly recognize or respect). In that context, do these public spectacles simply create the illusion of action? Will they lead to backlash and despair when change does not come after sensational spectacles? What if all the rousing speeches of yesterday (and all those that preceded them) cannot push "con" to "pro", Congress to progress? What if (in the ancient story of this Holy Week) the savior cannot save as the people who cry "Hosanna!" want him to? What if, in a few days, nothing seems possible?

With the benefit of hindsight, we know what happens after the Palm Sunday procession. The lethal powers work behind the scenes to shut Jesus down. Before we leave today, we hear the words and actions of those in power, crucifying the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The Romans (and the Jewish authorities allied with them) follow a well-trodden course, still used against truth-tellers to this very day. They assassinate his character first, manufacture charges against him, take him in the night, and trot him out for a public lynching. Marches, signs, chants and slogans did not, would not and could not save him. The people realized that they'd been beat, and when a PR campaign against Jesus distorted the meaning of truth itself, most of them turned their backs on him.

This is why I confess some cynicism. If even the Son of God could lose a PR battle and end up on a cross, how long will it be before we buy into the lie already peddled by some, that Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School teens and so many other youth are crisis actors in an eternal political game around gun control? What will this do to the brilliant teens and preteens of the school-shooting generation? I'm steeling myself already against the disappointment, which makes it harder to feel hope, or the possibility that this time could be different. Here, after the parade, I look ahead with dread.

Thank heaven that *God's* ways are not *my* ways, and God's thoughts are not my thoughts. Jesus understood that the human heart is fickle and prone to wander. He was prepared for that. I doubt that Jesus took for granted the powers aligning against him in Jerusalem. That's the reason that even though his soul was troubled, he would not pray for divine rescue from the worst that humans could do. "No," he says, "it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." Jesus alone may have known that the greater love of God can transcend even death itself. In fact, through the power of God's overturning, unimaginable love in him, even death becomes an opportunity for something unimaginably greater.

Listen to the promise of Jesus, as he foresees his own death around the corner. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." By a wisdom older than time and truer than the grave, love that is poured out in selflessness to others is not lost, but magnified a thousand times over. Even though Golgotha and crucifixion takes place after the Palm Sunday marches, death is not the last word. Divine love will find a way—even through death—into abundant, joyful life once more. When Love is buried in the tomb, it does not remain inert and hidden there forever. No, the seed of love sprouts out of the tomb and grows to new life. It bears much fruit—the fruit of centuries of believers who walk in his loving ways, the fruit of Catherine of Sienna, Mother

Theresa, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. These is not enough time in all the world to tell of the lives which Love has born, fruits that would not be possible had not Jesus remained faithful despite it all, had not his example inspired others like us to give our lives for the cause of love. It is *that* love and that faith into which Piper is baptized this day. It is the Christian conviction that death is no final end, and Divine Love marches on through it all.

Scripture sometimes speaks of baptism as its own form of death and new life. Each of us who is baptized has been drowned to the old ways of saving ourselves, and has been raised to the promise of heaven, to Love's eternal way. We are part of the fruit that grows from that planted grain so long ago. Therefore, in this Holy Week ahead, give of yourself too. Give the time it takes to keep watch with Jesus in Thursday's worship and Friday's vigil, because he comes alongside those who are suffer the deadly betrayals of life. Let us die to the lesser commitments of our schedules this week at least, persevering as Jesus demonstrates the love that passes all human understanding. Because "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." And when the No Greater Love of Jesus Christ arises on Easter morning, however bruised, battered or beaten it has been, Love marches on. This week, come and see! Amen.