

A Sermon for Palm Sunday, Year C
April 1, 2007
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Beyond the Tragedy!

This day has two titles, which appear at the top of our worship booklet: Palm Sunday, and The Sunday of the Passion. And we've just heard two gospels being read. The first tells the story of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and the second tells the story of the final hours of the earthly life of Jesus.

Today is also a day with two moods. There's the festive, joyous frenzy that accompanied Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. And then there's the solemn, almost anguished, mood that can overcome us when we remember what Jesus went through in his final hours of life.

One day, two moods. It almost seems to violate that law of physics which states that two objects cannot occupy the same place at the same time. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, during our Tuesdays in Lent program, we saw a video discussion of the Incarnation (*i.e.*, how Jesus is both fully human and fully divine), and the person being interviewed was using this law of physics to support his claim that the Incarnation, as we currently understand it, could not be true. My response to that argument was, "We're not dealing with physics, but with theology." And today, on Palm Sunday *and* The Sunday of the Passion, we're still not dealing with physics, but with emotions, and conflicting emotions *can* occupy the same person at the same time. In fact, I can remember something that happened to one of my daughters when she was still very young. She was probably having a bad day, maybe she was simply very tired, but suddenly that evening she started crying uncontrollably *and* laughing uncontrollably *at the same time*. And I've heard it happening in adults, too. And, by all accounts, it's not fun.

The potential intensity of the two emotions that we've encountered in our readings today, can be so strong, and so uncomfortable for us, that we sometimes try to separate them, and focus only on the joyous Palms liturgy – almost as if today were a dress rehearsal for Easter Sunday – and ignore, for the most part, the Passion liturgy. In fact, I was recently reading over the sermon notes of another pastor, in which he wrote: "Don't preach too much. [(Which is always good advice.)] Just focus on the triumph and the glory ..."

But one of the truths of life that this day is teaching us is that victory is on the other side of the coin from defeat, failure is on the other side of the coin from success, and faith is on the other side of the coin from despair. And, just as easily as we can flip a coin in the air, our lives can go from one side to the other. And today's gospel stories are our stories as well: We are among that crowd cheering Jesus as he enters Jerusalem, and we are also among that crowd that shouted for his execution. And that's a truth hard for some people to bear.

Deacon Shawn once was discussing our two gospel stories with a study group, when one member of that group found it inconceivable that the two groups were made of the same people. And she made the bold claim that, had *she* been in Jerusalem that week, she would most

certainly have been in the crowd that greeted Jesus, and would never have allowed herself to be in the crowd that condemned him.

And yet, this is one of the truths of this day, and it's one that not all of us wants to hear.

There is another truth that becomes clear on this day: Human life is often characterized by unresolved ambiguity. We hear about a crowd that yells "Hosanna," and we hear about a crowd that cries out "Crucify him," and maybe we're surprised to discover that it's the same crowd. We hear about a man who prays "Let this cup pass from me," and we hear about a man who says "Not my will but thine be done," and maybe we're surprised to learn that it's the same man, Jesus, saying those words. And we hear about a disciple who professes steadfast devotion to Jesus, and then we hear about a disciple who denies knowing Jesus three times, and we're surprised to learn that it's the same disciple. We're the same way. Ambiguity is the "Name of the Game" in most of our lives. And not just today only, but every day of our lives.

I know most of you have heard or read my stories about our eight-month old Welsh Terrier named Jack. Well, there are two areas of ambiguity in his little life. In one, he can move from being an absolute sweetheart in one moment, to being an absolute terror in the next. It's almost like he has the ability to be a shape shifter. In the other area of ambiguity in his life, there's me. In fact, ambiguity characterizes most of my relationship with Jack, but especially in our training sessions. During those times when I am trying to persuade him to respond to my commands, I play two roles: I am The Giver of Pain *and* I am The Giver of Pleasure. And my goal in life is to help him decide which role I will play at any given moment in time. ("It's all up to you, Jack!") I'll let you know later how he deals with *that* unresolved ambiguity. ("Embrace the ambiguity, Jack!")

Fortunately for us, there's a third truth for this day: God's love given to us, and God's love given to others through us, is one of the very few things that helps us to make sense out of our suffering, conflict, and tragedy. But even though God's love does not take these painful things away – the Cross should teach us that – it does make it possible for us to bear it, to understand it, and to pass through it. That is, perhaps, the most important truth that we can glean from today's gospel: out of one's suffering, meaning and hope can emerge. This is why a woman who has just undergone the pain of childbirth can, just as quickly as it's over, contemplate repeating the process. Pain, and suffering, as inevitable as they are, are not be the end of our story, for the love and grace of God can take us to the next chapter.

We have moved, through our readings this morning, from triumph to tragedy. And the temptation is to believe that this is the end of the story. Even though we know that Easter is just around the corner, there is the temptation to change the ending, to avoid what we know is going to happen, and try to make it all come out alright. However – and as much as I hate quoting cliches, but this one is often true – "No pain, no gain." But here are two things worth remembering. First, just as that crowd was guilty of causing the suffering and death of Jesus, you and I are just as guilty of bringing pain and suffering to the lives of the people that are part of our lives today. But, and this is the second thing, just as the condemnation of God was not the end of

the story two thousand years ago, *neither is it today*. What remains to be seen, is what we will allow God to make of all we have done, or failed to do.

Jesus did not die in order to make everything just fine, thank you. He died so that we might discover, in our weakness and suffering, a new and unrealized strength. He died, so that we might find, in our own brokenness, renewal and hope. In Susan Howatch's recent book, *The Wonder Worker*, there is this marvelous quote that touches on what I'm talking about: "A cure is the disabled person who gets up from his bed and walks. A healing is that same disabled person coming to terms with his lack of mobility, transcending his anger and grief and becoming an inspiration to all those who visit him."

Jesus did not die in order to take away the ambiguity of life, but to allow us to live life more fully. To get there, we start by looking at the Cross, and at a suffering, bleeding Savior. And while we are looking, knowing that beyond the tragedy there is truth, and redemption, and hope.