

Sermon for Palm Sunday 2025
Luke 22:14-23:56

There seems to be something hardwired into humans that makes us love parades, love spectacle, love heroes – however heroes are defined in a particular society. Approximately one million people camp out on the streets of Pasadena each year to view the Rose Parade in person; millions more make the time to watch the parade on TV. And that parade is more than 130 years old. Can you imagine? There must be something there that touches us deeply for that parade to have lasted this long. There are also our grand television spectacles, like the Emmys and the Grammys and the Oscars, where we watch excitedly as stars – modern heroes for many in today’s society – parade by, surrounded by cameras and adoring followers. Let’s face it: we are attracted to people who are bigger than life. We love following their lives, wondering what they’re like, marveling – or wincing – as they build big homes, fly around the world, wear gorgeous clothes, jostle for power, even if only the temporary power and glory of winning an award.

It is also true that people get something of a thrill when our heroes turn out to have feet of clay. People swoop in for the kill when something goes awry in a star’s life, when they seem bent on destruction, whether physical or social. Even though we love heroes, there’s also something darker within us that gets a kick out of a spectacular downfall, having it proved that a person we adored is just another flawed, fallible human being. Why do we do this? Who knows? Perhaps because seeing a downfall makes us think, “Hey, if I’d only had a bit more luck, that could have been me – and I would have handled that better than they did.” Or perhaps it’s jealousy that makes us love it when someone “gets their comeuppance.”

Whatever our reasons as a species for feeling and acting this way, our drama of lessons and ritual that is Palm Sunday allows us to give full play to the whole spectrum of feelings from adulation to betrayal and desertion. We know that the crowds who chant “Hosanna” today will be the ones crying “Crucify him!” later in the week... because we are those crowds. We know that one of Jesus’ closest followers will betray him... because we are there. We know that the disciples will turn tail and run when the going gets rough. We know that the religious leaders, who believe they are protecting Judaism from this upstart country prophet, will become strange bedfellows with the very Roman politicians they despise, in their joint desire to “disappear” Jesus and get him and his uncomfortable message off the stage. We know all this... because we are there, and we are those people.

When Jesus begins his journey into Jerusalem, he is soon surrounded by excited crowds, who have heard that this man heals people, feeds them, even raises them from the dead. Perhaps this Jesus really is the Messiah, the one who will throw out the occupying Romans and restore the Jewish Kingdom. Other people have claimed to be the messiah, and they all have fallen. Yet this man seems different, and so the hopes and dreams of the people remain high. Maybe this time it's the truth! Let's tag along and see!

And yet, in just a few days the crowds will have fallen away, deciding that there's nothing in what Jesus says or does that is good for them. Judas will betray Jesus. The disciples will run for cover. The religious leaders and politicians will set the civic machinery in motion, and a man will die. How ironic that, in a religion that values the community and the common good, the religious leaders and most of the disciples defaulted to self-interest and self-preservation. The Chief Priests convinced themselves that an unholy murder was justified to safeguard the institution. The disciples perhaps convinced themselves that if the work was to continue, they should protect themselves from arrest and punishment. And there the matter will seem to end. No happy ending, no Hollywood glamor; nothing but evil and disappointment and chaos. And everyone had their part in it. No one is entirely innocent.

I hope that you all took your part in the Passion reading, shouting out with the crowds. There's a reason that the church asks us all to play a part in this morning's liturgy. And the reason is this: we really do have a part to play, then and now, and often we're not aware that we are playing a part, or even that we're supposed to be acting. We are all actors in the Christian drama, today and every day... and if we are wise, we choose the part that we are to play, rather than blindly being thrust into a role that doesn't suit us. Make no mistake – if we don't choose a role, one will be given to us. And it may not be the role that we would take by choice.

So the question for us, this morning and this week, is this: Who are we? Where are we in the story? Do we test God by asking "What's in it for me?", and fall away if we don't like the answer? The crowd did. Do we act vindictively, out of disappointment and misunderstanding? Judas did. Do we run from Jesus and hide behind self-preservation? Many of the disciples did. Or do we stand fast with the women, and with Joseph of Arimathea, acting in faith and hope despite their bewilderment and sorrow?

Over and over again in the long story of the church, Christians have played their parts, not just on Palm Sunday, but in the daily life of parishes, dioceses, and the national church. And the church acknowledges this with our Holy Week liturgies, with the insistence that for one week out of the year, we stop and really think about

who we are and what we do, in our lives outside the church and as committed Christians. We are called to stop and think about when we have acted as our spiritual forebears acted in the Palm Sunday passion. We may not physically have fled like the apostles... but have we ever deserted the church when we haven't gotten what we think we need or when the going got tough? We may not gather in rooms to plot someone's literal downfall or death... but have we ever turned on a clergyperson or fellow Christian because they have spoken truth to us and shown us where we are in error? Have we ever put the stability of the institution, the comfort of four walls, before the call of Jesus to walk with him, tend and defend his sheep, live his life? These are some of the sins of Palm Sunday, and these are the sins that are alive and well and flourish today, just as they did then. This isn't an outdated story, or a once-a-year pageant. This is life.

For a moment, just a moment, it is good that the lessons today end with death, with no hope, with Jesus dead in the tomb and the disciples in hiding, afraid of dying themselves. For in this Holy Week, which begins today, we have much dying to do in order to rise to new life, and dying hurts, and dying risks the end of everything. Yet as a community of Christians here today and as individuals, it is, as St. Paul tells us, "in dying that we live."

Let us then confess and offer our sins, our actions, our parts in the drama, to God as we walk to the Cross. Let us truly journey with Jesus through the foot-washing and Eucharist of Maundy Thursday, through the Good Friday crucifixion and the emptiness of Holy Saturday, until we return for our Easter celebrations Saturday night and Sunday morning. Be here for the whole story, and be aware of your part in it, both the part you may be playing, and the part you wish you were playing if things were different. Use this time to consider what we owe to God for our salvation, and how we can amend our lives to be a continual thank-offering when we turn as a community from sorrow to joy. Only in that way will Easter Sunday mean more than flowers and candy for the children and family dinner. Only in that way will Jesus not have died in vain.

Amen.