



“Why Has God Forsaken Me?”

Scripture – Psalm 22

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025

Many picture the Palm Sunday procession to be akin to a Thanksgiving Day Parade minus the giant balloon characters. Or perhaps like the Eagles parade in downtown Philly after winning the Super Bowl. It has been portrayed as a joyful celebration of the day when Jesus swept into town to cheering fans. However, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the waving of palms and shouts of his followers, it had much more in common with last weekend’s “Hands Off” protests than it did a celebratory festival.

Last Saturday there were more than a thousand “Hands Off” protests in cities around the nation calling for our government to keep hands off free speech, LGBTQ rights, Medicare, Social Security, science, veterans, and more. Organizers had spent weeks preparing for the event. They sought to provide a platform for people to peacefully voice their opposition to recent government actions. These were no carefree parades. They were organized acts of resistance.

The same was true of the Palm Sunday procession. Jesus carefully selected the precise moment to enter the Holy City – a handful of days before Passover. This was the annual occasion when Jews celebrated God freeing them from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. In the time of Jesus, Pharaoh was a distant memory, but they had a new malevolent tyrant – Caesar. Jesus and his people lived under the harsh military occupation of the Romans, and, like their ancestors, they dreamt of liberation. The people yearned for the Messiah to drive out the Romans and dethrone Caesar. They longed for a virtuous king who cared not simply for the oligarchy, but for all people.

Fearful of an uprising, Pilate departed his plush palace on the Mediterranean to lead a regiment of armed soldiers into Jerusalem. This display of power warned the populace to stay in their lane and not to entertain thoughts of rebellion.

However, the Jesus march flirted with insurrection. His followers shouted, “Hosanna” which means “Save us” or “Deliver us.” Further, the people yelled, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Luke 19:38) They were declaring their allegiance to Jesus, not Caesar. It was a dangerous display of opposition to the emperor. This is why the Pharisees rushed to Jesus and said, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” (Luke 19:39) They feared how Pilate would react. The Romans would relish the

opportunity to set an example of what happens to someone who incites a crowd to talk of revolution. However, in that moment, there was no silencing them.

In the days following his entrance into Jerusalem, things spiraled menacingly downward. Jesus ran head on into a stiff wall of resistance among the religious leaders. They feared he would provoke the Romans into dropping their iron fist on anyone at odds with the emperor.

Over the past 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have often found themselves at such a crossroads. When a political leader is at odds with the ways of God – the way of love, the demand for justice, the need to care for God’s creation, and the recognition that all people are created in God’s image – followers of Jesus must decide which path to take. The integrity of our faith is constantly at stake.

Emboldened by the support of his followers, Jesus marched to the temple where he reminded everyone within earshot that this sacred place had been desecrated. Their house of prayer had been corrupted. He declared it “A den of robbers.”

The next couple of days Jesus spent teaching and arguing with the religious leaders who opposed him. On Thursday evening he sat down with his twelve disciples to eat the Passover Feast.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus washed the filthy feet of each disciple – a humble act usually performed by a servant. It was an experiential example of how he wanted his followers to carry on after he was gone. To underscore the symbolism, he spelled it out in unmistakable terms. He said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you.” Surmising that the sand in his hourglass was running thin, Jesus bequeathed them with the essence of his life and teachings: love one another.

Within hours, one of his friends betrayed him. As we all know, money has the power to corrupt one’s soul. Hostile henchmen ambushed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and marched him off to be interrogated. It was up to Pilate to discern the motives of Jesus. Was he simply a relatively harmless spiritual leader who was at odds with the Jewish religious establishment? Or, was he a potentially dangerous political insurgent challenging the authority of Rome? Pilate asked Jesus point blank: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus is reported to have replied with the ambiguous, “You say so.”

Soldiers stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him. They fashioned a crown of thorns and shoved it onto his head. They knelt before him and taunted him, shouting, “Hail, King of the Jews!” After mocking him, they led him through the city and out a city gate to Golgotha, the place of execution.

The most troubling issue for the early followers of Jesus was that he was not a mighty Messiah who conquered with unprecedented force. He did not defeat the occupying Roman army or wipe away the economic system that kept the majority impoverished. Instead, he was taunted, tortured, and crucified.

As Jesus hung on the cross and his life was draining out, Jesus cried out the opening words of the 22nd Psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Are there any words in Scripture more chilling than these? The Bible attests that Jesus is the Son of God and yet even he experienced the anguish of abandonment. Perhaps you have suffered such a devastating blow or were in the middle of such a terrifying situation that you felt as if God had deserted you.

Holy Week seems to display the whole human story. There is excitement, resistance, love, bravery, betrayal, cowardice, despair, and hope. Standing on this side of the resurrection, there is a mighty temptation to deny pain and suffering and feelings of abandonment. However, Holy Week beckons us not to turn our heads from the suffering of our world.

It may be that we hear so many stories of suffering that we have become numb to the pain. There are our personal experiences of suffering and that of our friends. Then, the daily news blares a constant stream of human pain from near and far. On one hand we are shocked that more than 50,000 people – most of them women and children – have been killed in Gaza. On the other hand, we insulate ourselves from the ongoing tragedy so as not to live in a constant state of despair. However, we dare not close our eyes. God expects us to stand firm against evil.

There is unjust suffering and there is suffering for a greater good. Some must endure innocent suffering and they deserve our empathy. However, there is another type of suffering. Some are so thoroughly committed to a noble cause that suffering becomes inevitable. This was the case with Jesus. His resistance to unjust power landed him on a cross. And sometimes unjust suffering beckons us to speak up and to speak out.

A colleague writes, “The cross is not about remaining passive and fearful. The cross is not about admitting defeat...The cross is about enduring whatever might happen to us when we confront, resist, and protest the injustices we see around us.”¹

Tom Long tells the story of Viola Liuzzo. “In 1965, when Martin Luther King Jr. asked for volunteers to join the march from Selma to Montgomery to assist the efforts to secure universal voting rights, one person who responded was Viola, a wife and mother from Detroit. Her husband tried to dissuade her from going to Alabama and joining the march. He said, ‘It’s not your fight.’ She responded, ‘It’s everybody’s fight. There are too many people who just stand around talking.’ That is why Viola went to work in that part of God’s vineyard known as the civil rights struggle in Alabama.”

“After the March, Viola was giving a young man, a civil rights worker, a ride back to Selma. A car full of Klansmen, who were enraged by the sight of a white woman in a car with a black man, sped up beside them, and fired a flurry of bullets into their car. The man survived, but Viola, 39 years old, was killed instantly. When Mary Lilleboe, one of Viola’s daughters, was in her 70s, she remembered her mother with these words: ‘She actually believed it when Christ said that the suffering and needy are our people. Mom saw all other human beings as her people.’”²

Friday of Holy Week was the day of suffering and death. Saturday was the day of shock and despair. If the Jesus story concluded with the execution of Jesus, there would be no church. If darkness and despair were the end of the story, life would be meaningless and unbearable. But death was not the final chapter. I trust you will be back on Maundy Thursday and then next Sunday to celebrate the surprise ending.

NOTES

1. Debi Thomas, “Cruciform,” *journeywithjesus.net*, April 3, 2022.
2. Thomas G Long, *Proclaiming the Parables*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), p. 199.

Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton

Holy God, how quickly the joyful shouts of “Hosanna” became the cry, “Crucify,” and how quickly jubilation and welcome turned to rejection and grief. As we enter this week of joy and sadness, a week of palms and foot washing, of least meals, crosses, and tombs, we pray that through the memory of this week we might be better able to stand firm in our faith when we are tested, that we might be willing to show love even when it may not seem expedient, and that we might be courageous enough to stand with those in this world who know too much about rejection in their own lives.

As we survey the world around us, we see fear lurking in so many homes and hearts – fear for safety, fear of financial ruin, fear of bombs dropping, fear for what tomorrow or perhaps even tonight may bring. O God, in these places, bring a measure of divine comfort in the knowledge of your presence.

As we survey the world, we see that violence seems to be woven into the threats of our world today. Violence in the form of warfare, discrimination; violence done in the name of retribution or power grabs or religion; violence that is spewed in languages and name calling; violence that destroys villages, food supplies, medical facilities, and infrastructure; violence that ends lives and hopes and possibilities. Amid so much violence, we pray for peace, O God. Give us the will and the courage to turn implements of warfare into the things that feed and clothe and house people even in the poorest places around the globe.

As we survey our own place and time, we lift up to your special care civil servants who have spurned higher wage possibilities to serve in the public interest. We pray for those in state capitals and in our national capital who have been elected or appointed to govern. We ask that they might be full of empathy, that they might know the things that bring wholeness to all, and that they might have the courage to stand up for those who are pushed down in our world. In times that feel turbulent, we pray for a sense of your presence. When we find ourselves unsure of how we might live the most faithful life possible, show us your way again and again. In the seasons of our lives when we are mourning loss, we pray for a special measure of your comfort. In times when our bodies seem like they are failing us, when our spirits sag, we ask for that assurance of your presence.

As we survey the cross again this week, and as we remember Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem, his call to love for one another, as we recall the broken bread shared, the cup that was blessed, and the agony and hope of the cross, we pray that your spirit might ride on in and through us, in and through this church, so that we might be nourished by our worship and our prayers, and that we might continue to be a vibrant witness to your love in the streets and neighborhoods around us, and in far flung places around the globe.

As we remember Jesus’ last week this week, we also remember the prayer which he taught saying, **“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**