

...Out Like a Lamb

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“Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road....the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice saying, ‘Hosanna to the Heir of David! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!’ ”

“Then Pontius Pilate said, ‘What shall I do with Jesus, who is called the Messiah?’ All of them cried out, ‘Let him be crucified!’ Pilate asked, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’And they spat on him...and struck him...and led him out to be crucified.”

Today is Palm Sunday. It’s also known as the Sunday of the Passion, a day when we anticipate the impending suffering and death of Jesus Christ. So today, we have two sharply contrasting themes. That’s because, for Jesus, the day we now call Palm Sunday was a day of stark contrasts. He knew that getting *into* Jerusalem would be easy; yet he also realized that getting *out* of Jerusalem could prove to be deadly. He rides triumphantly into town on a donkey, with the cheers of the people ringing in his ears; but he leaves staggering under the weight of a cross, with shouts of scorn heaped upon his head. In less than a week, Jesus goes from being hailed as the heir-apparent to the throne of David, to being mocked as the “King of the Jews” - complete with a crown of thorns.

This morning, I'd like us to think about what happened, to so drastically change Jesus' reception. We do so, not to look backward at the political and religious forces at work in First Century Israel, but to look inward at the psychological and spiritual forces at work in our own lives today. In other words, as we look at the dynamics of that first Palm Sunday and Holy Week, let's also examine what's going on with us *this* Palm Sunday. For example, how do we *truly* welcome Jesus and his message of inclusive compassion? Are there times when you or I change *our* tune, because Christ's call to forgiveness interferes with our own anger or indignation? Do our insecurities or fears keep us from following Christ's path of costly service and sacrificial love? Like those ancient Israelites, you and I can wave our palm branches and sing Christ's praise today, but what about tomorrow - when we're back to dealing with that cranky coworker, or nasty neighbor, or that extremely frustrating family member? Or when we're faced with the difficult choice of helping a stranger, or taking care of ourselves?

Jesus' journey to the Cross reminds us that following Jesus takes us on a path that goes against the grain of selfishness, and self-protective cautiousness. It signifies a total commitment to the Divine Way of compassion, forgiveness and graciousness. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, he's certainly aware that the message he proclaims - the Good News of God's abundant love *for* all people - will not be readily accepted *by* all people. Yet he doesn't change the message. He is resolved to teach and to show that Divine love and grace is for *all!*

Not just those who are like us;
Not just those who we like;
Not just a special, select few.

This puts Jesus at odds with the religious establishment - those "select few" who think that they have the monopoly on Divine truth and righteousness. Jesus also strongly advocates for the poor and the oppressed, which puts him at odds with the occupying forces of Rome, who suspect that he might be setting the stage for a religious uprising. So, with the disapproval of the religious leaders, and under the watchful eye of the Roman authorities, Jesus rides into town to the

cheers and hosannas of the crowd. Yet as the week progresses, and he *doesn't* move to overthrow the Roman oppressors, Jesus begins to experience a growing sense of disappointment from the crowd itself.

As this week between Palm Sunday and Good Friday progresses, the real purpose of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem becomes clearer to all: He hasn't come to forcibly capture the city; he has come to capture the voluntary allegiance of people's hearts and lives - to help them see, experience, and trust in God's loving care for them, and for everyone else. I believe that this is what gets Jesus in trouble with the religious and political powers; and why he loses the support of the general population: his *insistence* on following the Divine Way of compassion, forgiveness, and peace. I also believe that this is how Jesus reveals himself to be the Christ - God's Anointed Messiah and Authentic Messenger.

Because he is willing to let go of any egocentric need to promote or protect himself, Jesus is truly free to hold firmly to the promise of Divine Love and Grace. And because he trusts that his life, and the lives of all those around him, are eternally linked to that One Divine Source, Jesus faithfully follows through on his mission. He will not be intimidated by the religious or political power-brokers who seek to silence his message. Nor will he be discouraged by the fickleness of the crowd, who cheer him one day and jeer him the next. Jesus' undying faith in the never-ending love of God, allows him to move faithfully and fearlessly forward, in spite of all the dangers that surround him.

On a life-journey guided by love and self-giving, there are certainly no guarantees of safety or security. In fact, the potential for problems and pain probably increases; yet so does the possibility of genuine joy, purpose and inner peace. From the moment he rides down the Mount of Olives, things continue to go down-hill for Jesus. Yet he does not lose faith; he doesn't give up on the mission, or the message. Instead, he trusts that the Power of Divine Love and Grace will ultimately triumph over the forces of hatred, fear and even death. Easter morning is the glorious reminder that *Jesus has it right!*

It is definitely possible, and popular, to do all that we can to protect ourselves from harm, or loss, or being taken advantage of by others. *Or*, we can trust in the love and care of God; which doesn't mean that we will escape the pain or loss that Life brings. What it does mean is that you and I can live our lives fully, share our lives freely, and embrace the wholeness and holiness of Life all around us. And perhaps most importantly, you and I, like Jesus, can graciously live our lives - and give our lives - for the sake of others - trusting that there is nothing that can ever separate us from God's Love. When you and I *truly* believe this, we will gladly welcome Jesus and his message of inclusive compassion. We will consistently heed his call to forgiveness, even when it's particularly difficult to do so. And in spite of our fears or insecurities, you and I will find the courage and inspiration to faithfully follow Christ's path of service and sacrificial love - no matter where that path might take us.