

Zachariah 9:9-12
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday C
St Thomas, Medina
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Who's Your Hero?

There were two processions that day, you know. One from the east and one from the west. The procession that came from the east, from Bethphage and Bethany was led by Jesus, dressed in his dirty traveling clothes and riding on someone's borrowed donkey. The crowds for this parade were mostly raggedy peasants - fishermen, tax collectors and just about every kind of sinner you can imagine. They came to cheer on their new king Jesus, even though he wasn't exactly the kind of king they had imagined. But they had watched him. They'd seen the miracles and they'd sensed a pretty potent change in their own lives, just from being around him. He preached forgiveness, and talked about love and justice and peace. It left them feeling really good. The things he said and the way he treated them changed the way they looked at things, changed the way they treated each other. As long as he was around, things seemed clear.

These folks were peasants, people who hadn't any hope until Jesus arrived. But now things were different. Many of them felt as if they were forever changed. Jesus had made each one of them feel beloved, as though they really were somebody, as though their lives really did matter, as though there was hope, even for them. Sure there were others in the crowd who didn't really know who Jesus was, but they couldn't help but get caught up in it all.

The other parade, the one coming into Jerusalem from the west, was led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who ruled over a vast area that included Jerusalem. Pilate rode a mighty warhorse, and marched into town surrounded by soldiers decked out on the finest military garb, and brandishing the weaponry that would ensure they could keep the peace. And no wonder! It was the time of Passover, the holiest of times for the Jews, and a very dicey time for the Roman rulers. After all, Passover celebrated God's mighty acts in freeing the Jews from Egyptian rule. Passover had a tendency to rile people up. The Roman occupiers always made it their business to be in Jerusalem during Passover.

It was a volatile time, a scary time, and at the raggedy parade the Pharisees told Jesus to get his followers to simmer down. They knew how the Roman rulers would beat and bloody anyone or anything that might disturb the Roman "peace." But it was too late. Things had gone too far. For the people at that parade, there was no turning back. They had experienced a different kind of peace – the kind that passes all understanding. And once you've experienced that sort of thing, there's just no pretending that you haven't. Even if Jesus could have gotten them to be quiet, it wouldn't have mattered. His message of love was so profound, so real, so inescapable that even the rocks would have cried out. It was a heady time with all those people shouting "Hosanna in the highest." They were celebrating the king they thought would conquer the Roman powers and make a better life, a better world for the regular folks. But things didn't go the way they expected them to. Jesus wasn't the sort

of hero they thought they were looking for, and when he didn't exert the power those people expected, they turned their backs on him and exchanged their heady "hosannas" for enraged shouts of "crucify him, crucify him..."

Have you ever given up on God when things didn't turn out the way you thought they should have? It's an easy thing to do. We so often try to create Jesus in the image we need or want him to be, a recognizable hero who will save us from everything we think we need saving from. Like the disciples and the crowds at the parade on that first Palm Sunday, we want the conquering hero who will make all things right. A God who will reach in and manipulate attitudes and situations and lives so that things will come out the way they're supposed to, so that things will come out "right." We want God to take away what is bad and give us, or at least the ones we love, only goodness and well-being, happiness and health.

But that isn't who God is and that isn't how God works. Whatever we imagine for our lives, God imagines so much more. God doesn't reach down from heaven and manipulate things so that everyone is happy and all is right with the world. Instead, God incarnates. And when God incarnated in Jesus Christ, God gave us everything we need in a hero. God didn't come to fix us. God came to love us, and to teach us how to love.

Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him... Philipians 2:5-8

That's the kind of hero he was. He told them all along that he was going to suffer and die, but they didn't want to hear that. They only wanted the easy parts. And what they couldn't see was that the easy parts come as a direct result of the hard parts. As it turns out, Jesus was offering them something infinitely greater than whatever it was they were wishing for. He was offering a new way of being human, a way which embodies that incredible self-diffusive love of God. It isn't the easy way. But it is the only way.

As much as we want to revel in the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, waving our palms and shouting "Hosanna in the highest!" there's just no staying there at the parade. Oh, we can leave church this Palm Sunday and not come back until Easter Sunday, skipping from one parade to the next, but what a poverty that would be. Life isn't always a parade – not Jesus' life and not ours. Beautiful things happen, but terrible things happen too and what Jesus teaches us by living and dying as he did is that God is in all of it with us. God is in there at the parade, at the supper table, stooped and washing our feet, and hanging on the cross... there is nothing we will ever experience that God won't join us in. And there is no better way to understand that than to journey with Jesus through the last, most holy week of his life.

Oh, I understand our reluctance. Our lives are busy and it's hard to go to church so many times in a week. But give yourselves this gift. In this one holy week, give yourself over and enter fully into each one of our beautiful and moving liturgies. Because when you do that, you will come to the Easter resurrection filled with a joy that is unimaginable for the ones who came straight from the Palm Sunday parade.

Don't wait until next Sunday to come back! Join us tomorrow night in a service of healing and reconciliation when we'll begin this most holy week with beautiful music and quiet meditation. Come and offer up all of your hurts and heartaches to the God who loves you more than you can possibly imagine, and feel the tenderness of absolute forgiveness, and the gratitude that comes of being a part of this caring community.

Make sure your middle & high-schoolers get to the Tuesday night Holy Week service created just for them. Keeping company with their friends, just as Jesus did with his, they'll journey through the last week of Jesus' life, and into the light of his glorious resurrection.

Bring your whole family on Maundy Thursday when we will have supper together, sharing communion at table with our friends just as Jesus did on that last night with his. We'll listen as he reminds us that unless we humble ourselves enough to let him wash our feet, we can have no part in him. Come to the garden, hear the story of his arrest, stay with him in the chapel and keep watch.

And don't be afraid to come back on Friday, that most difficult day we call "good..." You will feel the greatest love of all that day, alive in the story of the God who chose to experience every single aspect of what it is to be human.

And when with God's friends, we have walked alongside Jesus, feeling the love of deep friendship, the heartache of betrayal, and the seeming loss of everything that is good, we will come to the Easter Vigil knowing that God is with us in absolutely everything, and that love always, always wins. Babies will be baptized, there will be stories and noisemakers, fire and mystery, the first Eucharist of Easter and the sheer joy of welcoming back the light and life that can never die. The joy of Easter resurrection experienced in the Easter Vigil is like nothing else. And making the journey through this week is how we will know it.

The events of Holy Week are not easy. They weren't easy for Jesus and his friends, and they aren't easy for us. Yet Holy Week embodies all of our questions, all of our suffering, and the greatest joy of all. Holy Week helps us to see God at work in every aspect of our lives, not waving a magic wand to disappear our fear or sadness, but making meaning out of everything we experience and turning everything, finally, into love. And that, my dears is a God infinitely more powerful than any hero of our own imagining.

Join us on the journey ... because the journey is how we know.

Amen.