

Palm Sunday (March 28, 2021) Text: Both Gospels; Philippians 2
“Tears and Joy! Joy and Tears!”

“Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” . . . “They shouted back, ‘Crucify him!’” . . . “Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’”

Many of you know by now how it could be that the same crowd that yelled in jubilation as Jesus rode into Jerusalem could, less than a week later, be crying out for His bloody death. The answer, of course, is that it is not the same crowd.

The Palm Sunday crowd was made up of peasants and pilgrims, people who saw in Jesus a real hope for their future. The Good Friday crowd was composed of the religious leaders and their lackeys, who saw in Jesus a threat to their well-being. One commentator suggests that this is because both crowds are confused about who Jesus is. The peasants and pilgrims think He is a Messianic figure of their own devising — one who will throw off the Roman oppressors and bring in the *pax Davidica*, the peace that reigned when David was king so many centuries before. The temple horde sees Jesus as a Messianic pretender, whose political and/or military aspirations will inevitably bring about a Roman response for which they will suffer. Both groups, it turns out, are guided by self-interest (which I find interesting indeed!)

Self-interest is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. It tends to keep us alive, for instance, by not letting us jump off ten-story buildings or trying bare-handed wrestling with polar bears. Self-interest also promotes many useful things for self and then for others — you can bet that power steering was invented by someone whose self-interest was hard at work. Self-interest is likely what keeps most commercial enterprises running:

the self-interest of the owner/employer to maximize his income; the self-interest of employees to have and keep a job, and thus provide income for their survival and welfare.

But, there is a danger in self-interest, and it is found in that portion of the phrase “self” — the self is a tricky little part of us that, properly controlled does just fine, but allowed to run amok . . . well, it does just that, runs amok. When employers or employees focus solely on self, the enterprise in which they are engaged is in jeopardy. When individuals act with regard solely to self, they cause problems for others (we label such people “self-centered,” “narcissistic,” or in extreme cases “solipsistic”).

Throughout this season we call Lent, we have been asked to enter into a period of meditation, repentance, and contrition. For the 46 days we are walked that walk. “*But wait, Pastor,*” someone should say, “*there are only 40 days in Lent. How come you said 46?*” Well, it has been 41 days since Ash Wednesday with a week still to go. There are 46 actual days from Ash Wednesday to Easter; so how can we talk about the 40 days in Lent? It’s because of the Sundays — every Sunday, even those in Lent (and you will note that in the church calendar that are listed as “*such and such Sunday IN Lent*” not “*OF Lent.*”) every Sunday is a celebration of Easter.

So in our somewhat depressed season of Lent, we are to experience these islands of Easter hope and joy. Except that throughout Lent we remove any songs or liturgy that carry the word “*Alleluia!*” The Gospel readings appointed for this season all seem to focus on the cross and crucifixion. The hymns and songs are decidedly less upbeat. So what gives? Are the Sundays in or out? I guess I would have to say . . . “*Yes.*”

Then we come to this day, where we begin the worship waving Palm branches and singing “*Hosanna!*” and then we settle in to hear the sorrow-inducing reading of the Passion of Our Lord. As one Pastor thoughtfully expressed it: “. . . *apparently, my job in this sermon is to get you suitably depressed to begin Holy Week.*”

But that is not my job. My job is to help us recognize that this ambiguity, this roller-coaster ride, is a representation of life. If you know someone who is always — I mean always! — upbeat, happy, big smile on the face . . . after a while you begin to wonder, “*Is she okay?*” If you know someone who is constantly in the dumps, unable to work out a smile, constantly complaining . . . after a very short while you begin to wonder if this person needs professional attention. We all know — because we have all experienced — life as ups and downs, victories and defeats, times of happiness and sadness.

We certainly hope for more ups, victories and happiness than downs, defeats, and sadness . . . but we have experienced both and are not shocked that this is the common human experience. What we lose sight of all too often is the God is present in every one of those moments. In really bad times we are wont to cry, “*Where was God?*” That’s because sometimes God is experienced as absent. “*Aw, com’on, Pastor; that’s just playing with words.*” Actually, it’s not. The pain of the absence of God is a very real, often documented phenomenon. Some have explained it by the term “The Dark Night of the Soul.” When we enter it, we come to a realization of how deeply God matters in our lives.

Sometimes people who go through difficult valleys in life want to give vent to their anger that God seemed so absent, or that God did not step in to prevent the hardship from coming in the first place. But these same people seem fearful to express anger toward God because they have been led to believe that such anger will only trigger God’s anger toward them (and they have been taught as well that God is much, much better at expressing His anger than they could ever be at expressing theirs).

Let’s talk about God’s anger (or the more usual term, His wrath). I fear that many of us have been led to think that what happens in the Passion narrative is one of two things: God turns His back on Christ at the moment of His most extreme agony; or God acts something like a cosmic Elmer Fudd screaming for the wind and lightning to come and “*Kill the wabbit!*” — just this angry, visceral outpouring of punishment and pain:

“Take that and that and that! That’s for Brenda’s lies! That one’s for Howard’s cheating! That’s for little Clarence’s lack of obedience.” Just over and over and over God smites Jesus, venting the divine spleen over our missteps, our erroneous judgment, our thoughtless behavior.

Luther calls God’s wrath God’s “alien work.” By that Luther is trying to help us to see that God is not, by nature, motivated or controlled by His anger. **“God is love,”** St. John tells us [1 John 4:8]. Now, I know that every parent in this room who has ever gotten angry over something one of your children did will want to defend that anger with the notion that you got angry because your so loved your child. Maybe, but likely not. You more likely got angry because of frustration, disappointment, or pique. Frustration that the child had either done something you forbade (not leave their boots in the middle of the hallway floor) or failed to do something you commanded (pick up their toys in the living room). Disappointment when he or she came home with a less than desirable report card, or worse, a disciplinary note from the teacher or principal. Pique when they just seemed to ignore what you seemed to regard as important.

We tend then to project onto God the same kind of wrath; God just gets ticked off at us. That may be the way we are wired; it is not how God is wired. When Luther tells us that anger/wrath is God’s alien work he is telling us, *“that God’s own nature is love and that wrath is essentially alien to him, and yet wrath, as God’s reaction to sin is a reality—although it is . . . not the final reality”* [Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*. p.171].

Always, always God’s wrath is trumped by His love — which is the message of the cross. God determined that our sin could not and would not be a cause for a rift between us. He did not place Jesus on the cross so that He could have a venue to finally and with full force vent every ounce of anger within, get it out of His system once and for all, so that there would be nothing left for us but beatific smiles.

He and Jesus and the Holy Spirit conspired together to let love rule the

day, and have Jesus serve as substitute for us so that for all our futures . . . when we have that bad report card, or have messed up (no matter how royally), or act just plain goofy . . . we do not have to “make” God love us again, we have only to be wrapped in the cloak that is Jesus and know that our standing with God is secure.

But Luther gives this warning. *“As you think, so God is. If you believe God is angry, he is . . . Thus our thoughts have a great effect. For God will be toward me as I think he is. So that even though the thought that God is angry is false, it will nevertheless be so . . .”*

Our standing with God has always been secure in Christ . . . we lose sight of that, or simply do not trust it to be true. So we think we need to stand with the crowd as Jesus enters Jerusalem and scream out to Him, *“Save us!”* [this is what the word “Hosanna!” means . . . it is not a word of praise, but an intercession].

Now this morning we did shout *“Hosanna!”* (twice, in fact) but not because we need to be saved. If we were to cry out “Hosanna!” today or any other morning, asking Jesus to save us, do you know what answer you would get? *“Can’t do it. Already done.”* We cry out *“Hosanna!”* to remember all that Christ went through to get that done and to rejoice that it has been done. So, for us, *“Hosanna!”* has changed meaning; it is no longer a cry that says, *“Please, save us!”* but a confession, *“You have saved us!”*

In the process, something else has changed: that thing called self-interest. The crowds on the Jerusalem streets and the crowd in Pilate’s courtyard both acted out of self-interest I maintained earlier. But now we see that, since we don’t need to petition a Messiah to come to our rescue, nor do we need to fear He will somehow enmesh us in power politics to our detriment, we are truly free.

“Truly free,” is not the same as *“totally free.”* Totally free would mean that I could choose in the next moment to become a rabbit. Not going to happen. Truly free means that I am no longer held captive by my self-

interest with all of its prejudices and biases, with all of its pre-conceived notions and ideas, with all of its past baggage of poor choices, foolish actions, thoughtless words, and self-centered values. I am now free to begin (let me accent that: “*begin*”) to think like Christ.

Look at today’s Second Lesson and you get a summary of what that means. To condense it further, we can express it with two words: humble and obedient. Two words we say we like and approve; two words we most often ignore and despise. Humble here means honestly to believe and live as if you are not the star of your own movie, the grandmaster of your own parade, and the center of your universe. Obedient means that you want to listen for the whisper of the Holy Spirit, hear the voice of the Savior, and follow the Word of God.

There is a third word that is important for us — so important that I am going to coin that word right now — we are “*Hosannaed*.” Now, I need to tell you that as I wrote that I thought I was being very clever by turning that Aramaic noun into a verb. Then it struck me: my spell-check didn’t highlight it; it is already in the vocabulary. So I didn’t coin the term; I will still use it. We are saved. We are Hosannaed!

This Palm Sunday, as is true each year, is a day of joy and tears, tears and joy — celebration followed by crucifixion. Such also are our lives: a mixture of reasons to cry out in praise and reasons just to cry. Palm Sunday also reminds us that, in this mishmash we call life one thing has remained constant . . . it was a promise we hear every Christmas and tend to lose sight of as the weeks progress. In all the things we go through; whatever brings us joy or causes us pain; however we mess up or make it through; this we need to hold tight: His name is still Immanuel, “***God with us.***”

Amen.