

Let's imagine ourselves at the palm parade and see if we can relate to the excitement of the crowd. Imagine that you're standing on a crowded Jerusalem street, all the more crowded because it's the Passover, and Jewish pilgrims from all over the known world have travelled here, the site of the Temple, the residing place of God. You've heard about Jesus, the stories of his miracles, his teachings, and his many challenges to the status quo. Jesus is a man of the people, just the kind of man who could garner enough popular support to raise up a rebellion against the Roman occupiers and even clean house at the Temple. As the shouts of the crowds get louder, you see spot Jesus and you wave your palms as you join the crows shouting, "Hosanna!" Let's do that together, ready? "Hosanna!" Remember, you're at a loud and crowded parade. How do you expect Jesus to hear you if you don't shout? Let's try that again: "Hosanna!"

The word "Hosanna" has an interesting meaning. In the Psalms, it means something like, "please save us." But as we gather along the parade route and shout this to Jesus, its meaning is more of a joyful exclamation of thanksgiving, closer to "Praise God, we are saved!" And as Jesus draws closer to you, and as the crowd gets even louder, you become fully convinced yourself. This truly is the Messiah, God's anointed one, the man whom the people will make King by popular acclaim, restoring Israel to her former glory and putting down by force all those who would stand in opposition. How could we fail to praise God on this Day? "Hosanna! Hosanna!" Praise God, we are saved!

But the way of love that Jesus came to show us wasn't one of political and military conquest. That's not the kind of King Jesus was meant to be. Jesus knew that the road his Father had appointed for him was the road of self-sacrificing love, which has never been especially popular in any culture. And so Jesus warned his disciples: "'The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things,' he said. 'He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead.'"¹

That's not exactly the kind of hopeful speech you might expect from your leader,

¹ Luke 9:22. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

right? Yes, he mentions that he'll be raised from the dead, but what are the words that really stick out in his speech? Rejected and killed. Jesus isn't exactly painting a picture of a compelling future that touches our hearts.

But Jesus knew of what he spoke, and he delivered one of his best short summaries of the Christian way of love, not just to the disciples but to the whole crowd gathered with him: "Then he said to the crowd, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?'"² That sure is a different vibe than the one we got at the palm parade, right? NOW who wants to wave their palm branch and shout hosanna? "Hosanna? Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord?"

Let's go back to the parade again. I invite you to close your eyes and use your imagination. Can you hear the crowd shouting? Can you taste the dust in the air and feel the excitement of the crowd? Now imagine that somehow the parade suddenly comes to a standstill as Jesus comes before you and makes eye contact with you. He gets off his donkey, hands the reigns to one of his disciples, and leads you off into a quiet, shady spot off the parade route. Inviting you to sit, he looks deep into your eyes and your heart. Being with him this closely makes you aware of your love for him, but also of all that lies within your heart that's not right. What do you say to him? What is it that you've been searching for, working for, hoping for, longing for, instead of Jesus? If Jesus is the way of love, what other ways have you been walking? And what's been holding you back from being "all in" with Jesus on the way of love?

Whatever it is that's been holding you back, now is the moment to hand it over to Jesus, to leave it behind in the trampled dust of the parade, so that you're free to follow Jesus, past the palm parade, and through the difficult journey of Holy Week. (You can open your eyes again and rejoin me in 2021). Let's consider now what our most difficult destination is, where Jesus himself has said we're going. It's not our final destination, but this, too, is found along the way of love. I'm reading from the Gospel of John, in Chapter 19,

² Luke 9:23-25, Ibid.

beginning with verse 17 in the New Living Translation.

{Read John 19:17-30 NLT}

It's incredible, isn't it, that even as he was giving up his life of the cross for us, Jesus, the way of love, was showing love to his mother by placing her in John's care. Every step of his Holy Week journey was intentional and marked with love for God and others, from the Palm parade, washing the feet of his disciples in the Upper Room, and ultimately, his broken body on the cross.

As we travel with Jesus through this Holy Week, what will your allegiance be, and when will you make your decision? Will you retreat to serving yourself first, or will you continue on the way of love, serving God and neighbor?

Judas made his decision early on when he betrayed the way of love to the High Priest. The other eleven disciples faced a crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Gospel writer Mark, in his characteristically simple style, puts it this way: "Then all his disciples deserted him and ran away."³

There had, of course, been plenty of others who had deserted Jesus up to this point: The rich young ruler who went away sad;⁴ The "many" followers who turned away because they couldn't accept his teaching about eating his body and drinking his blood;⁵ and even these same twelve who had fallen short so many times before. But a betrayal of Jesus while drawing close to the cross is harder for us to face because it's so much harder to deny that we might have done the very same thing. When the soldiers arrived in the garden to take Jesus away to his trial and death, would we have stayed with Jesus, or scattered to the four winds along with all the others, choosing to save ourselves rather than give ourselves?

Perhaps there are some things that are simply beyond our human capacity to endure. Facing death by crucifixion may well be one of them. What is it in your life that's threatening to overwhelm you? Is there something that makes you want to abandon your faith, turn tail, and run for the hills?

On the other hand, Jesus was fully human, and Jesus endured the ordeal of the cross,

³ Mark 14:50. Ibid.

⁴ Mark 10:17-22.

⁵ John 6:60-66.

remaining faithful to the will of his Father to the end. He did that out of love for you and me. Is it possible that there's something of Jesus available to us that might give us the courage to love, even after our human strength and resolve have melted away in fear?

Jesus said something on his way to the cross that gives me great hope that, even in those times when our heart quakes, we can find hope that love will prevail. Even as he approached his agonizing death, Jesus was already looking past the desertion of his disciples and past even his own impending death. "But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there."⁶ What a hope-filled sentence, and yet apparently missed by the disciples who were preoccupied with their own dismay and terror. Jesus would be raised! Love would defeat death!

The thing that makes it possible for us to face Holy Thursday and Good Friday isn't something inside ourselves. It's not our character, or moral fiber, our strength of will, our level of education, the way we were raised, or anything of that sort at all. In fact, it's really not even anything from our past. It's all about how we see our future through faith. It's the hope that when our love fails, as it inevitably must on this side of eternity, the same Lord who was raised from the dead has the power and desire to raise us out of sin and restore us to the way of love.

Fear has a way of leading us to focus on ourselves. The more we focus on ourselves, the less likely we are to be able to follow our leader, Jesus. The disciples couldn't see the plain hope that Jesus was holding out to them. Hope of forgiveness. Hope of new life. Hope of restored relationship. As we begin Holy Week today, our challenge is to take our eyes off of our own feet long enough to see that the Lord who is leading us to the cross of Calvary is also leading us to Easter morning and the power of the resurrection. But first we must follow him to the Garden and the Cross.

Please take some time now to reflect on your upcoming journey through Holy Week. How will you make the most of these seven days to more fully embrace the way of love?

⁶ Matthew 26:32. Ibid.



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