

Called to Worship

“Becoming Authentically Human” - Lent VI

Matthew 21:1-11, Psalm 31:9-16, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philipians 2:5-11

April 17, 2011

This morning is the beginning of the Holiest, the most sacred week of the year on the Christian calendar. Today is Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. An event which seemed to hold so much promise. It is estimated that some 200,000 people, mostly Jews, ascended upon the usual city of 40,000 people to celebrate the Passover, which was an annual event. But this year it was even extra special because Jesus' ministry was coming to a climax. What began three years earlier was coming to fulfillment. It says in our Scripture this morning that the whole city was “stirred.” Other versions use the words “in turmoil.” The Greek word that is used there literally means “to be shaken,” “to tremble,” as when experiencing something like an earthquake. Something big was about to happen! Did you come to church this morning with that sense that something big was about to happen? Or did you get up like you usually do on Sunday morning, “oh, another Sunday, I have to go to church. I wonder how the music is going to be. The sermon, I hope it's not too long. Alex's message last Sunday was rather short. I hope Dick's is more like Alex's.” Oh, come on, don't tell me no one this morning was feeling like that. I know I was. Somewhere along the way we have lost the sense of what worship is supposed to be all about. That sense of awe, or reverence, or maybe even a little “Holy fear.”

On that first Palm Sunday, people knew that something big was in the air. They didn't quite know what it was. Perhaps a confrontation, between the rulers of this world, and the rulers chosen by God. Between the Jewish religious authorities and the secular authorities. The world was about to change. The long-anticipated Messiah had arrived! Riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, just as prophesied many years before by the prophet Zechariah. All the people were waving their palm branches, shouting “Hosanna” - which means save us. They quoted the words of the prophet Isaiah, and from Psalm 118: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

As Jesus and his followers, mostly peasants and Gentiles from the east, entered Jerusalem, with their Messiah riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives, most likely on the opposite side of the city, from the west, approached the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, on a war horse at the head of a column of imperial calvary and soldiers. He had come for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover.

The stage had been set for the clash of the two kingdoms. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God, while Pilate's proclaimed the kingdom of this world, the power of the empire, thereby embodying the central conflict of the week that would lead to Jesus' crucifixion.

But even for Jesus' followers, even his closest followers, even his disciples, they might have recognized Jesus as the long awaited, the long prophesied, Messiah who had come to save God's people, but they didn't recognize the type of Messiah he was nor the kingdom he had come to represent. Expressed best by the Gospel writer Luke's account of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem:

*As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said,
“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-
but now it is hidden from your eyes.”*
Luke 19:41 (NIV)

The entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday and all of the events of Holy Week are a reminder that God’s ways are not the ways of this world. “Gentle, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,” should have been the first clue:

*When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”
The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”*
Matthew 21:10-11

That is the question we all must answer for ourselves. “Who is this, Jesus?” “Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” Is he just a prophet, one of many, in a long line of prophets who came before him? Is he a prophet in general or is he the prophet predicted, beginning way back in Deuteronomy, when Moses said:

*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own
brothers. You must listen to him.*
Deuteronomy 18:15 (NIV)

Was not John the Baptist the last of the old testament prophets who pointed to the greatest who was to come, “look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?” For many they didn’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and for others they didn’t recognize the type of Messiah he was. He had come not to save God’s people through might and force, through political or military means. He came to save God’s people through suffering, service, and ultimately the giving of his life. That which is captured by our other Scripture passages for today:

*The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me
morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious.
I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard.
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.
Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!
It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me?*
Isaiah 50:4-9a (NIV)

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in
appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on*

a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that is at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
Philippians 2:5-11(NIV)

Jesus was to become the one sacrifice that all the other sacrifices pointed to. It is hard for us today to grasp the significance of the sacrifice(s). It is hard for us today to grasp the significance of how evil sin is in the eyes of God. It is the antithesis, the extreme opposite, of all He is and all He represents. So much so, that ever since the first sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden, the sin had to be atoned for through the death of someone or something. A sin offering, or sacrifice would have to be made. Blood would have to be shed.

The first blood sacrifice is found in Genesis 4 when Abel offered his sacrifice of one of the first-born from his flock. His offering was acceptable to God and became the first of the blood sacrifices that would begin the bloodstream of redemption for the forgiveness of sins, continuing all the way until the death of the Messiah. Cain's offering was not a blood sacrifice but from the "fruits of the soil." Cain's offering was not acceptable to God. When Cain got angry, God said to him, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door" (Genesis 4:7). It began with a lamb for the sin of one man. . .

At the Passover in Egypt it became a lamb for a family:

On the tenth day of the month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household . . . The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect.
Exodus 12:3,5

The Israelites had to paint the blood of the sacrificed lamb on the door frames of their homes and God would pass by, saving the entire household.

In the Book of Leviticus, it becomes a lamb for a nation:

This shall be an everlasting statute unto you, to make an atonement for the children of Israel, for all their sins once a year." Leviticus 16:34 (KJV)

Once a year for the sins of a nation. A progression of blood sacrifices: A lamb for a man, Abel. A lamb for a family at the Passover in Egypt. A lamb for a nation on the Day of Atonement. The climax of the bloodstream of redemption was pointed to by John the Baptist. It was no casual statement:

Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John 1:29

It was not just a coincidence that Jesus' death would come during the Passover celebration. When Jesus hung on the cross at the end of the week, a lamb without defect was being slain - not just for a man or a woman; not just for families or a nation; but a lamb for the entire world:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16 (KJV)

The Book of Hebrews is a great book to read during the week leading up to Easter. It is all about pointing to Jesus as the final sacrifice. Read [Hebrews 10:1-18](#)

So, what is the offering required of us today? We find the answer in Romans 12:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers (and sisters), in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Romans 12:1 (NIV)

The final blood sacrifice has already been made. Made, once and for all. For all who choose to put their faith in Him. The sacrifices that God is looking for today, from us, are "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to Him."

The Greek word for worship means "to bow down," to surrender one self, to give one self over to, to be worked, to be cultivated as the soil is cultivated. It is an action word. It involves service and sacrifice. Worship in the eyes of God is certainly, no little thing. The word "worship" means "worth-ship." How much is God worth to you? The sacrifices that we are willing to make are always in proportion to the amount that God is worth to us.

The so-called "worship wars" that took place in many of the churches, including our own, during the 80's, 90's and the first decade of the 21st century, were really an insult to God. I can picture Jesus looking down, just as he approached Jerusalem, and weeping and saying, "if you, even you, had only known what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes." Whenever the focus becomes the worship style, or the type of music, or our own preferences. Whenever the focus comes off of God and onto ourselves, we have lost the focus of what worship is all about.

Not only is it the sacrifice which makes it acceptable to God, but it is the manner in which it comes. For Cain, it was not only the sacrifice which was unacceptable, it was the manner in which it was presented. Cain's sacrifice was rejected by God because he, himself, was unacceptable. What kind of sacrifice is acceptable to God? David asks the question in Psalm 24:

"Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" Psalm 24:3

Then David answers his own question in the following verse:

"He who has clean hands and a pure heart, . . ." Psalm 24:4

The same words are expressed in [Psalm 15](#):

The sacrifice that God is looking for is a living sacrifice that is offered with clean hands and a pure heart.

This week, when I thought about the procession on that first Palm Sunday, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, I thought about the funeral procession for James Hostetler, the former chief of the West Liberty Fire Dept. I don't know how many of you were able to see it, or perhaps got caught up in it. It was pretty impressive. But the procession was really not about all the fire trucks, or all the people that showed up, or all the other things involved, the procession was to give tribute to and honor the man who gave his life as a sacrifice for many, a living sacrifice to this community. Not just to the fire department, for fifty years total, twenty-six as the chief, but also to his family. His children, grand-children, and one of his son-in-law's, spoke about his influence on their lives, and to the Emmaus Christian community and Epiphany prison ministries. He truly was a living sacrifice. It all came from his strong faith in Jesus Christ, His Savior, who gave His life not only for Him, but as a ransom for many.

On that first Palm Sunday, what began as a celebration, was actually a funeral procession. As we enter into this Holy week, the procession begins, Jesus is on the way to the cross. How are you preparing yourself to worship the one who gave it all? How will you be preparing for next Sunday, Easter morning? Will you be coming with clean hands and a pure heart? Lots of opportunities to help you prepare in the week that lies ahead. There will be no regular *Time for Prayer* on Wednesday evening. It will be replaced by a Maundy Thursday service in the fellowship hall which will include a light meal, singing, a brief meditation, followed by foot-washing or hand-washing as we cleanse ourselves to create a pure heart, in preparation for Easter morning. Friday there are two opportunities to help us prepare. Serving at *Our Daily Bread* in Bellefontaine, to help feed those who are less fortunate and the community Good Friday Service at Green Hills at 6:30 p.m. If you time it right you can even attend both. Or decide which one is right for you. Worship is about giving back. Giving back to the one who gave everything for us.