

Palm Sunday, Year C
April 14, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

After hearing a presentation as profound as the Passion Narrative,
mere words seem almost like an intrusion.

Our readings today turn us
from the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem,
and call us to face the grim reality of Holy Week ahead.

Easter is there, beckoning, at the end of this week's mystical journey.
But until then, the church enters into a time of confusion,
a place of suffering,
a place of betrayal and fear, and pain.
Were we on an airplane,
our flight crew would caution us to fasten our seat belts,
as turbulence surely lies ahead.

In this dark and difficult time,
we will do what we Christians always do in our liturgy:
we will commemorate the life, death and resurrection of our Savior,
and we give thanks that through him we have been redeemed.
We celebrate the fact that each and every one of us
has already been saved through the grace of Jesus Christ.
This saving mystery is before our eyes every time we gather.

We celebrate Holy Week as we observed all of Lent
– not as if we had never been redeemed,
but because we have the stamp of the cross already upon us.
Every year at this time,
we relive these ancient events,
because by recalling them in detail,
by re-enacting them,
we participate more fully in our own salvation.

We know that Christ has gone ahead of us
to prepare a place for us.
And we can look ahead in anticipation
to his return in glorious majesty
and the coming of the reign of God.

But until that time,
we have work to do.
We've been given a commandment:
to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.
To help us do that,
the church provides this yearly remembrance
so that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

In this, Holy Week is a mysterious paradox.
Begun today in triumph,
with people waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna,
it has already shifted into that dark time of suffering and death.

The great omnipotent God
who created the universe,
who has existed since before time,
and will continue to exist after everything we hold dear has come to
ruin, who sees all and knows all,
who became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ:
this same God is now hanging nailed to a cross in the mid-day heat.

The God who caused floods,
who spoke through earthquakes, wind, and fire:
this same God
now chooses to submit to the agony of crucifixion.

The God who led the people of Israel out of captivity,
stayed with them as they wandered in the desert,
and guided them to the promised land:
this same God now gives himself up to death.

It may seem puzzling that an all-powerful God
would choose to go through such an ordeal,
that the highest power of all
would choose not to act,
not to rescue,
not to save.

Yet for us as Christians, this is no contradiction.
For Easter is already on the horizon.
We know that just a week from today
we'll be singing out in joy again.

For those first-century followers of Jesus, however,
the outcome was far less certain.
They had no idea that the tomb would be empty on Easter morning.
No, they would have cried with Jesus,
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

For us, this is a powerful reminder
that miracles happen in God's time, not ours.

So often, we are just as frightened and feeling forsaken
as those first disciples were.
We're suffering,
and we want God to act NOW, not later.

Today, for us, the words usually sound something like this:
“If you really are God, take away the cancer now,”
or “If you love me, God, lift this burden from me,”
“You who are so powerful, why won't you just give me a little help?”

We become like those chief priests, scribes, and elders.
They said, “Let him come down from the cross, and we'll believe in him.”

Our bargaining typically sounds like this:
“If you will just heal this disease, I will believe in you,”
“Deliver me from this awful situation, and I will be faithful from now on.”
“Just let me have this one thing, and I will show my thanks by making a generous donation to the church, O God.”
I know, because I have said these same words myself.

But God rarely responds with a quick fix for our problems.
And God does not make bargains with us.
God's saving help does come to us when we really need it
but not necessarily when we *think* we need it.
Miracles do happen,

but in God's time, not ours.

Sometimes, we must experience the depth of despair
before we can appreciate the joy of our many blessings.
In the Twelve Step movement,
they speak of needing to "hit bottom" before recovery is possible.
In our Christian vocabulary,
we affirm that we need to suffer death
before resurrection can occur.

This is part of the pilgrim journey for us this Holy Week.
Like Jesus, we give ourselves up to death,
so that we, too, can be resurrected.
We die to sin, to selfish ways,
to all that has held us captive.
We let go of our need to control,
of our anger and our envy,
of love of power and status, and wealth.
And we give in to the love that will not let us go,
to the power that will indeed come to our aid when we truly need it,
and to the sure and certain hope
that God is already doing more for us
than we can ask or imagine.

So let us once again muster the courage
to look into the face of death this Holy Week.
For us, darkness has now come over the whole land,
and the curtain of the temple is torn in two.
And the only way out is to trust in God alone,
saying, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."
Amen.