



April 2, 2021 – Mark 15:1-39

For Palm Sunday, I wrote a sermon that attempted to emphasize we all find ourselves in situations where we look forward to some sort of celebratory event with anticipation. Sometimes that anticipation creates wonderful feelings of excitement and joy but it can also create feelings of anxiety and fear. Today, on Good Friday, those who often fear something will go wrong or imagine the worst may find this day to be one that they can identify with easily.

Jesus' disciples had just witnessed the excitement of people cheering Jesus on as he rode in to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey on Palm Sunday, yet here we are only a few days later, witnessing the arrest, torture and crucifixion of Jesus. Whatever could go wrong has gone wrong. Those who had feared the worst have been proven right – and it may have even been worse than even they had imagined possible. The pain and suffering Jesus experienced on Good Friday was extreme and those who loved him were suffering also. Jesus' mother and closest friends were gripped in the agony of grief while also fearing for their own safety. Shortly after Jesus' death, his disciples would gather in places where they hoped the authorities would not find them. They were afraid that they too would be arrested and possibly even crucified alongside Jesus. The celebratory event of Palm Sunday that had seemed so right and felt so good was now overshadowed by the atrocity of Good Friday and felt so terrible.

I wonder if this transition from Palm Sunday to Good Friday is one of the reasons some Christians are hesitant to get too excited about celebratory events or believe that everything will be much better from that moment on? Has this biblical story we have heard year after year about even the Son of God suffering so greatly just a few short days after his disciples and followers cheered him on caused us to become anxious and worried about what might go wrong if we get too caught up in a celebration? Do we think that if even Jesus can go from triumph to what seems to be utter failure so quickly, it could happen to us as well? And even if we know about Easter, we still want to do whatever we can to avoid Good Friday. I don't think any of us want to have to suffer so greatly in our journey to an Easter sort of celebration, no matter how wonderful it might be.

This tendency to worry about the future and think about all the things that could go wrong is a human quality I wish we could get rid of. It doesn't serve humanity well. Certainly there

are times we should look forward and make plans, including for a rainy day, but that's not the same as dwelling on the negative possibilities and letting them rob us of the joy of the moment and any celebrations we might be part of. Can you imagine how disheartening it would be to be invited to a wedding and you soon begin thinking about all the ways the newly married couple might struggle or even fail? Can you picture the joy of watching your child graduate from university, college or some sort of work program being taken from you because you are also contemplating all the hardships that your child might experience in his or her new career? Can you see yourself enjoying the news that your cancer is in remission or your heart disease is being looked after and you should be able to enjoy many years of good health if you are also convinced that it is only a temporary reprieve from a disease that will almost certainly come back to take its toll on you and rob you of those years?

It can be extremely difficult to enjoy a celebratory Palm Sunday sort of experience if our minds are already running ahead to the possibility of a Good Friday sort of experience that is waiting on the horizon. And the more we believe that Good Friday always follows Palm Sunday the more difficult it will be to let ourselves enjoy the moment of celebration or join in with the festivities. We may get very good at hiding our fears or pretending that we are not worried about the future, but we are only fooling other people and not ourselves. I urge everyone, especially all Christians, to not let ourselves be defined by Good Friday. I don't appreciate some of the movies that have been watched by millions of Christians that emphasize the cruelty and horror of Good Friday while deemphasizing the celebration of Palm Sunday and the joy of Easter. Yet, these Good Friday Passion stories seem to attract millions of viewers and I think it is because there is a part of each one of us that believes something bad will or may happen to us as well, even if not in the same way it did to Jesus. We are attracted to these sorts of movies that include accounts of a celebratory event quickly followed by a disaster of some sort because we can identify with the characters. Many books, movies and plays have plots that follow the typical pattern of celebration followed by disaster which causes emotions of joy to be followed by emotions of pain. For some reason, many people are attracted to them and can't get enough of them.

In my Palm Sunday sermon, I mentioned that the vaccines that have been developed and are now available for more and more people to help eradicate the coronavirus are something to be celebrated, yet some people are already looking ahead to all the ways the vaccines might cause suffering because they may not work as well as we hope or may even do harm to some people. I wonder if this is because of the Good Friday sort of focus by

these people as they anticipate the worst things that might happen instead of enjoying the celebratory Palm Sunday event now beginning? I'm not sure about this but I do wonder about it.

Yet, I don't want to trivialize Good Friday or the sort of Good Friday sort of experiences people do have because they are real and they are painful. Most people will experience their own sort of Good Friday at some time in their life. It might come in the form of a much loved family member dying or the end of an important relationship because of unresolved conflict. It might arise because of a financial crisis due to job loss, business failure, or unexpected medical bills or other expenses. It could become part of our lives because of some totally unknown situation that we have no awareness of or control over. But our obsessing over these possible but also unlikely disasters can be very detrimental to our health and our enjoyment of life.

I always find the Good Friday sermon to be a difficult one to write, and I have often used stories instead of a sermon like this one today, because stories help us to feel the pain of Good Friday. However, I think we've had enough pain and suffering for this year and so I encourage us to not dwell on Good Friday this year but to give thanks for the celebration of Palm Sunday and anticipate the upcoming joy of Easter. We are called to be an Easter people and I think this is one of those times that we need to be that more than ever. Amen.

