

Palm Sunday C 2016

Luke 19:28-40

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 23:1-49

When we lived in Nicaragua,
The highlight of Holy Week was –
No, not awesome, touching and lurid processions
Through the streets of the dingy ancient city,
Not church bells ringing
In the torrid air –
The highlight of Holy Week
Was the airing, every evening,
On the only tv station,
When there was a signal,
Of religious movies.

Our Nicaraguan family could hardly wait for this.
They tried to get their tv fixed for the event;
When that failed,
They rigged up a new coat hanger,
which actually reduced the snowstorm
to the degree that we could see figures on the screen.

And so, every night after dinner,
We would gather to see what we could see.
The Ten Commandments.
We made it to Mount Sinai,
But missed the promised land.

Ben Hur.
I still have never seen the chariot race.

And finally, on Friday,
The Greatest Story Ever Told.
We saw Jesus,
But before we got to what one reviewer has labeled
“his mysterious return,”
the lights went out.

Truth be told,
I was not too disappointed.
I am familiar with the outlines
Of the greatest story ever told,

And though there are other favorite stories
I love to see on the screen,
This one, to my mind,
Cannot be captured.

The great stories are bigger than we are,
And we live inside them.
And still they fit inside us,
And change us from within.

We love the big themes
Of the greatest stories.
Journey. Search for Meaning.
Homecoming.
Love and Fulfillment.

And no matter how wise we are,
No matter how carefully we have schooled ourselves,
We still resonate to the dichotomies
That divide our experience and our world.
Light and dark.
Life and death.
Feast and famine.
Triumph and tragedy.

Triumph and tragedy.
This is the frame into which we so often fit Palm Sunday.

We're not wrong when we do so,
But if we keep the story in that frame,
We will stay fixed on the surface
And never dive into the story's depths.

Because the triumph and the tragedy
Are not what we imagine.

Yes, God's holy and beloved one
Is, just once, recognized and adored
By the crowd
As he was by angels at his birth.

And yes, God's holy and beloved one
Is killed as a spectacle for the same crowd.

But this greatest of stories
Defies our expectations.

The tragedy is the unsung demands
And fickle loyalties of the crowd.

And the triumph is waiting,
Hidden like a seed in the darkness of the tomb.

But we don't know that yet,
If we are faithful to our journey
And enter the story as if for the first time.

There are many ways to enter the story.
One that the faithful have practiced through time
Is to try to put ourselves
In the person of one character in the story.

What is it like to be someone in the crowd,
Waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna?
In your imagination, see the sights,
Hear the sounds, smell.
Taste the dust.
Feel the palm in your hand.

What is it like to be one of the women
Who followed Jesus from Galilee?
See him dead on the cross.
Hear the lamentation of the crowd.
Smell the terrible hill
Where crosses are hung with criminals
Dead and dying.

Each of us will discover something unique
If we accept the invitation and enter this story,
Through someone waving palms in the crowd,
Through one of the women standing at a distance
When we go to the cross on Friday.

What do we discover,
If we can stand by,
looking at the cross from a distance,
Summoning all our courage,
Simply to remain present to suffering and death?

What do we discover,
If we can raise our voices in shouts of praise,
And then, in all honesty,
Admit that we are praising

What we do not know –
Crying out for what we want,
Unable to see
What is being offered.

When we shout Hosanna,
We are shouting for a king,
For someone who will come and establish order
And promise safety.

God offers something else,
And we turn our backs.
Enter the story and find
An invitation to self-examination,
To humility.

Watch from a distance
As God shows, on the cross,
What love and forgiveness look like.
Enter the story and find
An invitation to courage,
To fortitude,
To faithfulness.

Allow yourself to enter the story today,
And all through this week.

Discover the tragedy that breaks into the world
When our human frailty and force
Meet God's compassion and surrender.

And wait for the triumph.
It is hidden in the darkness of the tomb,
Like a seed in cold ground.

It needs to wait there,
Until the time is right.
There is no rushing it.
There is no fast forward.

Walk the road this week;
Be present on the journey.
Enter the story,
And let it live in you.

