"Is This the Right Psalm for Palm Sunday?" March 28, 2021
Psalm 118:21-29 Westminster, Greenville
Palm Sunday Ben Dorr
****

Do any of you know the story of Quanah Parker?

Quanah Parker was…
the great 19th century Comanche warrior,
born to a Comanche chief and a white woman,
Cynthia Ann Parker, in 1848.

A wonderful book was written about Quanah Parker and his fellow Comanches not too long ago—*Empire of the Summer Moon*, by S.C. Gwynne.

In his book, Gwynne describes a time when the country was trying to push west, but the Comanches were still a powerful force. For years, the Comanches were able to almost single-handedly prevent the westward expansion of the United States, raiding and killing those who ventured too far into their lands.

They were, Gwynne writes, "the most militarily dominant tribe in American history." And Quanah Parker was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, leader that the Comanches ever had.

But after the Civil War, the United States put much greater effort into fighting the Native Americans who were providing so much resistance.

And eventually, Quanah Parker and his fellow Comanches were left with a stark choice:
keep fighting and be killed,
or surrender.

Parker was the last of the Comanche leaders to give in, but he did.

And what's remarkable about Parker's story is the way he reinvented his life.

This brave and fearsome warrior gave up fighting.
He integrated into the life of late 19th century America, and became a respected and wealthy person.

In 1890, Parker had a 10-room, two-story house built for his family. It was the kind of home that no other Native American had ever had.

It was a home in which he entertained and hosted many guests, including President Teddy Roosevelt in the early 20th century.

All in all, it's a fascinating story:

Quanah Parker could not see or predict the future when he walked into Fort Sill on June 2, 1875, and surrendered. He had no idea what the rest of his life would look like.

On the one hand, how did he ever bring himself to surrender—to the very people who had killed his father and recaptured his mother?

On the other hand, what would have happened to his life, if he had not had the courage to surrender?[1]

******

I'd like to invite you to consider that word this morning.
The word surrender.

[1] S.C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History*, New York: Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, 2010.

There are a couple of reasons that I'd like you to do this.

The first is that it's Palm Sunday.

A day that begins with the proclamation of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. A day that points us toward Holy Week, when the crowds who praise Jesus today will turn on him by Friday.

And when those crowds turn on him,
when his own disciples betray him and flee from him,
when the religious authorities accuse him,
and the Romans decide to crucify him…
how does Jesus respond?

Jesus does not fight back.
Jesus does not run away.
Jesus essentially lets himself get arrested.
He surrenders.

Have you ever considered looking at Holy Week this way?

I'll be the first to admit, surrender sure feels like a "negative" word.

It means giving in.
It means giving up.
It means letting someone else get their way instead of you.

Which leads to the second reason I want you to consider this word, surrender.

Our Psalm for today is the traditional Psalm for Palm Sunday.

It's the Psalm that the Gospel of Mark quotes in the Palm Sunday text we heard just a few minutes ago.

Mark writes:

"Then those who went ahead [of Jesus] and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

Where did Mark get this language?
From Psalm 118, in which the Psalmist writes:
"Save us…"—that's the English translation of the word, 'Hosanna!'

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

There's a note in my Bible that says, perhaps, part of Psalm 118 comes from an ancient victory song. In other words, the Psalmist found himself in a desperate place.

Verses 12-14, which we did not read, go like this:

"They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns…I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me."

"The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation."

It's a Psalm of victory!
A Psalm of triumph!
It's not a Psalm written by the Psalmist because he was forced to surrender….

Which raises the question:
Is this the right Psalm for Palm Sunday?

What does it mean that at the beginning of the week, we join the crowds in praising Jesus as king…and then, on Friday of this week, we

will have become like those who turned their back on Jesus, those who denied ever knowing Jesus, those who would rather run than stand next to Jesus…as he is arrested, and tortured, and killed?

How we do we handle that tension?
The tension of today's joyful praises—like the ones we find in our Psalm—with our own complicity in Jesus' death?

What does it mean, exactly, to say that we will faithfully praise Jesus as he rides humbly on a donkey, but then we will surrender that faithfulness to our own fears, surrender those praises our deep-felt desire to save our own skin?

It's a complex word—surrender.

There is, I think, a healthy instinct in all of us that RESISTS this word.

Do you remember when Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer and be killed? He told them three times. The first time he said it, Peter doesn't want to hear it.

Peter rebukes Jesus.
Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." (Matthew 16:22)

And I get where Peter is coming from.
I would like to stay in the part of Palm Sunday that feels Triumphant.

The part that feels like we are gaining something great—not the part that knows we're about to lose something or someone so important to us…

The act of surrendering, of giving up, of letting go of something or someone so important to us—there is a healthy instinct in us that says NO to all that!

******

In Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*—the story centers around a blind French girl and a German boy who are living in Europe when WWII breaks out.

Both are caught in events that are beyond their control, events that help determine the outcome of their lives. And one of the questions that courses throughout this novel is the question of choice: how much choice in our lives do we truly have?

Werner is the name of the German boy.

He is a small boy, brilliant boy, and he lives in an orphanage, and one day he gets selected to attend an elite Nazi training school. Werner is adept at fixing radios, and his teacher at the school quickly takes notice of Werner's potential—Werner's mind will make great contributions to the Nazi war effort.

At the school, Werner becomes friends with a boy named Frederick. Frederick is near-sighted, but won't wear his glasses out of fear that he will be kicked out.

Frederick has a love for birds.

Frederick does not always seem to have his mind on the task at hand.

And part of the discipline of the training school is to ferret out the weakest boys so that only the strong endure—survival of the fittest. So of course, the near-sighted boy who cannot shoot straight and loves birds emerges as one of the weakest.

Frederick is picked on by the other kids.
Bullied and beaten up by the other kids.

Werner begs Frederick to go back home, but Frederick says, “We don’t have choices. We don’t own our lives.”

A bit later, there is a scene in which a man who has escaped a concentration camp is re-captured. The prisoner is staked to a post outside on a freezing winter night, and the commander orders the boys to go one-by-one and throw a pail of cold water on the prisoner.

The first cadet does what he is told.
Then the next, and then the next.
The prisoner is close to death.
Even Werner does what the commander asks of him.

But then it’s Frederick’s turn.

And Frederick takes his pail of water, and he pours it on the ground.

The commander gives him another pail of water.
“He is gone, sir,” says Frederick, about the prisoner tied to the stake.
And he pours this pail on the ground.

The commander gives him yet another pail.
“I order you!” says the commander.
“I will not,” Frederick replies.

And Frederick—the so-called "weakest" boy, the one who told his friend, Werner, that "we don't own our lives"—Frederick, of all people, refuses to surrender to his will to the will of his Nazi commander.[2]

******

Do you see what we're talking about this morning?

Surrender is a VERY complex thing.

On the one hand, there are times in each of our lives when we're supposed to fight, to hold fast, to give it everything we've got.

And there are other times when we need to stop resisting, to stop fighting, to "Let go and let God," if you will.

How do we know which is which?
How do we know when surrendering is a faithful act, or when it's a fearful act?

Even Jesus struggled with this.

You remember the last night of his life, right?

Mark tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus "threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him."

There was a part of Jesus, in other words, that did NOT want to surrender.

[2] Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*, New York: Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2014. I am indebted to Donovan Allan Drake's sermon, "If These Were Silent," in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2017, for calling my attention to this scene in the book.

"Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me…"

And then, that last phrase of his prayer:

"…yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Who did Jesus surrender to right there?
It wasn't the Romans! It was to God!

To do what it was that Jesus believed God wanted him to do, even when part of him did not want to do it—that too, was an act of surrender.

And the fact that this act of surrender was a struggle for Jesus—well. Knowing this about Jesus gives me strength and courage—and I hope it does the same for you.

Because chances are good that there may be something going on in each of our lives right now, some struggle, some back-and-forth, all about something that we really want to hold onto, and we don't know whether we can hold onto it…and you yourself, in your own prayers, have gone to God and said, "Do I need to let it go?"

It could be anything.

It could be the ladder that you keep climbing—a ladder of societal success. Climbing that ladder, it gives you more money, it gives you more status, it provides all sorts of freedoms for your family—but sometimes you wonder what would happen if you stopped climbing. If you stopped climbing, would that hole in your heart be healed? Does God want you to keep climbing the ladder, or is it time to turn that ladder over to God?

Maybe it's a dream you have that has not quite panned out—you had a picture of your future that has grounded you and kept you going

for years. But something has happened. You thought your future would look like this, and now it looks nothing like that.

And the question becomes, do you keep pursuing the future you had in your imagination?

Or do you surrender your future to God?

What do you struggle with right now when it comes to holding on…vs. letting go?

******

When the professor Richard Lischer found out that his 33-year-old son's cancer had returned, he says he went into his bedroom and hit the wall with his fist, crying out, "It is a robbery!"

But Lischer goes on to say that he knew at some level,
as Adam's death became more imminent—
he knew that he had to move from "It is a robbery,"
to a place that allowed him to say:
"He was my son, and I give thanks for him."

"Those who grieve have no illusions about denying death or making it into a beautiful experience," Lischer writes. "We only want to remember in a saving way so that something whole and complete may come into view."

And so Lischer describes how, shortly before his son died,
he kissed Adam's head and thanked him for being his son.

"I promised him then that his death would not ruin my life…"

Adam, however, appeared puzzled by his father's comment.

"What I meant to convey to him," Lischer goes on, "was how utterly perverse it would be for a young man so filled with love to become the cause of an old man's bitterness."

So Lischer said to Adam:

"…you know, the best thing that can happen to a father like me is to have a son like you. I promise you, my love, I will not waste this gift."

How did he do that?

How did Richard Lischer move away from the bitterness?
How did he surrender his very justified feeling of being robbed of a child—and arrive at a place of gratitude for the gift of that child?

Only one explanation came to his mind.

"To remember in this way is the work of God."[3]

******

In other words, even our acts of surrender come only by God's love and by God's grace.

Let me invite you to remember that this week, as you and I walk with Jesus on his journey.

It's true, when we surrender something valuable to us, something we are used to having, our lives will look different, and feel different.

[3] Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

I also hold fast to the GOOD NEWS of this week: that through the act of surrender, in some way we cannot yet picture, our lives will become an even greater reflection of God's divine grace.

And we'll know that it wasn't our work that got to us to that place. It was God's.

Then the Psalmist's words today will become our words:
"This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes."

Amen.