

“If Only They Had Known”

Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday

April 10, 2022

Westminster, Greenville

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Not too long ago, it was a Saturday evening, after dinner,
and our family was scrolling through different movie options,
Netflix, Amazon trying to find a film that we all could enjoy,
and watch together...

We came across a movie that’s over 20 years old now.
It was a war movie, an action movie, one of our sons asked about
that movie.

My wife and I looked at each other and said, “No way!”
Not because it was a war movie.
But because it was a POOR movie.

We remembered that movie, because we went to see it together on
one of our first dates. And one of the reasons it stands out in my mind is
because of the way I reacted to it in the movie theater itself.

Sometimes, you see, (I’m better about this now), but in earlier
years of my life, when the plot of a film becomes too predictable, I’ve
been known to GROAN OUT LOUD in the theater, to say something
like, “Give me a break!” loud enough for those around me to hear.

In the early years of my marriage, it would often earn me a swift
elbow to the ribs from my wife.

So, 20 some years ago, during this movie—it was clear where the
film was headed, and it was clear I wasn’t going to like it, and I
remember muttering, after one utterly inane scene, “Give me a break!”

But then I thought: “Whoops!”

I didn't know my future wife that well at the time...we had just started dating...what if she was enjoying the film? What if she WAS a fan of predictable, Hollywood-ending type movies??

Thankfully, my future wife was disliking the film as much as I was at that moment, but that's not my point.

My point is not about movies.
 My point is about FALSE HOPE.
 Unrealistic expectations of life.
 Far too cheerful descriptions of life.

To believe that life always turns out neat and tidy, where everything gets wrapped up in the end, like a classic, happy Hollywood story...it's false hope.

Do you know what I mean, when I say: false hope?

In the mid-1970s, when the famed dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn defected from the Soviet Union to the United States, there was great rejoicing in American diplomatic circles.

What a coup!
 What a comeuppance for the Soviets!
 Solzhenitsyn is with us...we have Solzhenitsyn!

In 1978, Harvard University invited Solzhenitsyn to deliver the commencement address at its graduation ceremonies.

Thousands gathered to hear the famous writer.
 Many assumed that they knew what Solzhenitsyn was going to say.

He would DENOUNCE the totalitarian Soviet regime.
 He would celebrate freedom, tolerance, the prosperity of the West.

What Solzhenitsyn said was this:

“On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience...[but] we have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life.

“In the East, it is destroyed by the dealings of the ruling party.
“In the West, commercial interests tend to suffocate it.

This is the real crisis.”¹

Many in the audience were confused.
Spiritual poverty? Moral lassitude?
Where was the gratitude for being in America?

Some people in attendance turned on Solzhenitsyn,
booed their guest speaker that day...

Why?
False hope.

And so here we are at Palm Sunday.
A day that’s defined not by happy endings, but by contradictory emotions and events.

On the one hand, there are the songs of praise.
A sense of hope!
The day begins with hosannas and hallelujah!
The glorious procession of Jesus into Jerusalem.

¹ As told by Thomas G. Long in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

And the disciples quickly found themselves embarking on a faith journey that they did not understand, and did not know where it was going to lead.

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever experienced life in such a way,
 that you were counting on one thing,
 hoping for it, pinning your future on it...
 and then whoosh—just like that, it was snatched
 away?

Will Willimon, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, recalls the time years ago when a couple came to visit, maybe in their 60s. They were there to see the neo-Gothic, beautiful Chapel. They were admiring the carving and architecture, when the husband slumped to the floor.

His wife cried out.

She later told Willimon that they were planning an early retirement in North Carolina, because the climate was more hospitable than Iowa. They were in Durham to see the sights of their new home. He had no history of heart trouble.

She entered the Chapel with her plans for the future in place.

She left the Chapel a widow.

During her husband's funeral, she asked to say a word:

If you are going to love somebody, she said with tears in her eyes, do it today.

If you are going to tell someone they are special, that their life has touched yours, do it today.

She had become wise the hard way.²
 She had come face to face with dashed hope.

Please don't misunderstand.
 I'm not saying that you and I have our sights set on things we
 should never hope for.

Consider the hopes you brought into this sanctuary this morning.

Perhaps you are a parent, and you're hoping for your children to
 grow up and go out on their own, to find a career and a calling that fits
 them, for health and happiness to meet them, and perhaps find a partner
 who will share life's joys and sorrows with them?

If that's what you wish for your children, there's nothing wrong
 with that hope.

- Maybe some of you have come desperately hoping for peace
 in Ukraine right now...
- For all those refugees to find a safe home right now...

Or maybe your heart is weighed down with worry for a loved one,
 and you're desperate for the grace and peace of God to show up in your
 loved one's life in gentle and healing ways?

If any of those are on your list, don't throw them away.
 Those are good hopes.
 Faithful hopes.

² William Willimon, "What Time Is It?", in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, edited by Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994.

But the question Palm Sunday raises is what happens when life happens, and God is not rescuing us but dumbfounding us, and we mutter, “This is not the God that I hoped for!!”

After all, I know what kind of God I often find myself hoping for, when life throws a curveball my way.

I want a God who FIXES my problems.
I want a God who heals diseases.
I want a God who does not let innocent civilians die because a cruel dictator wanted to go to war.

I want a God who does not mess with how I spend my money.
I want a God who rewards good behavior.
I want a God who does not let bad things happen to good people.

All of which makes me wonder—would the multitude have praised God, on that first Palm Sunday, if they had known?

If only they had known the terrible things that were about to happen to Jesus, if the disciples had been clear about the DARKNESS that was looming...would there have been the cloaks on the road, the waving of palms, the shouts of joy?

If the people shouting praises had known that Jesus was going to die, they would've tried to get Jesus to go the other way, save him from disaster, spare themselves the grief of losing their rabbi and leader and friend.

No Palm Sunday celebration, if only they had known...

And yet, according to Jesus, that's not true.
It is the most curious part of Palm Sunday for me.

Luke writes:

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Why would Jesus say this?

He knew where this parade was going to end.

He knew he was headed to the cross.

And still, Jesus tells us that if all his followers were silent, the stones would shout out God’s praise!

Please don’t gloss over that verse.

It’s a very important verse.

What is Jesus talking about?

I think he means this:

The paradox of Palm Sunday says that we praise and trust and follow God...even when our hopes for the future happen to fall apart.

Palm Sunday says that we put our next foot forward in faith, even when we do not understand God’s will or God’s way in our lives.

Palm Sunday says that giving thanks to God, singing glory to God, is NOT dependent on our fate, and it’s not dependent on our character. Our praise of God is dependent on the goodness and grace of God.

In an episode of the Netflix series, *The Crown*, the tragic story is told of the 1966 coal mine disaster in the Welsh village of Aberfan in which many schoolchildren were killed.

Queen Elizabeth refused to go to the funeral but sent Prince Philip instead. In a moving scene, the prince stands with the villagers before an open grave holding scores of coffins.

He weeps as the villagers, mourning the deaths of their own children, sing the hymn, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.”

When Philip returns to Buckingham Palace, the queen asks him about the funeral.

“Eighty-one children were buried today,” he tells her. “The rage...in all the faces, behind all the eyes. They didn’t smash things. They didn’t fight in the streets.”

“What did they do?” the queen asks.

“They sang,” Phillip replies.

“The whole community. The most astonishing thing I ever heard.”³

Have you ever heard that kind of singing?

The kind of singing that occurs at the foot of the cross?

The kind of singing that happens, NOT because you find yourself on firm footing, but because you trust that God is supporting you, holding you, walking with you even when you cannot see God by your side?

³ For reminding me of this scene, I am indebted to a devotion by Thomas G. Long in his and Donyelle C. McCray’s book, *A Surprising God: Advent Devotions for an Uncertain Time*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.

A hospital chaplain I know—he’s retired now, but I’ll never forget the story he once told one of the patients in his hospital.

Her name was Meg.

Meg was 61 years old.

In 1950, she had lost the use of her legs to polio, and 40 years later, she was suffering a relapse called “post-polio syndrome”.

The symptoms were nothing short of cruel:

Extreme fatigue, muscle weakness,
stomach and neck pain...the list went on and on.

During the visit in her hospital room, my colleague asked Meg a question:

“What, if anything, sustains you or gives you hope?”

She replied, “I learn to say, ‘Hallelujah anyway. God, I’m going to praise you anyway even though sometimes I wonder if I really mean it, or feel like it.

“And I don’t know why I’m saying it except I know that you are real, and I want to be on your side though I don’t understand any of this, and I’m miserable and lost and confused, and all the Scriptures that I’ve ever read don’t make any sense right now.”

Hallelujah anyway...

What my colleague says he remembers most was the look in her eyes, a look that said, “I dare you to make sense of what I just said!”

What I remember most is that my colleague—as he told me later—
was struggling with a deep depression when he first shared that story
with me, that he was—

simply by showing up to work—
living his own example,
bearing his own witness,
to Hallelujah anyway!

Hallelujah anyway is what Palm Sunday is all about.

We don't sing praises today because faith is formula,
because we have all the answers,
or because God always rewards the good.

And we don't sing praises because God promises to give us happy,
Hollywood endings.

We sing praises today because God has promised us Jesus.

After all, Jesus is the One who walked this road before.
And Jesus is the One who travels with you even now.

Jesus is the One who, in the face of monumental contradictions,
threw his life into God's loving arms, who trusted God with his life,
even unto death itself.

Hallelujah anyway...have you ever heard someone sing it?
Have you ever seen someone whose faith was grounded in that
kind of song?

I have.
It happens every Sunday.

Every Sunday, when I look out at all of you—
and I know the struggles that some of you are facing,
in your life, in your family's life...
and I still see you giving thanks and praise to God.

You know what that gives me?
It gives me hope.
Not false hope.

But hope in the power and grace and love of the living God.
In that power and grace and love,
let us go forward to the cross with Jesus this week...

Amen.