



PALM SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 28, 2010

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Lection - John 12:12-15 and Psalm 37:32-33 (New Revised Standard Version)

John 12:12-15

(v. 12) The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. (v. 13) So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

(v. 14) Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: (v. 15) “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

Psalm 37:32-33

(v. 32) The wicked watch for the righteous, and seek to kill them. (v. 33) The LORD will not abandon them to their power, or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Palm Sunday brings us to the close of Lent, a season of denial and sacrifice, and ushers us into Passion Week (Holy Week) with all of its hope and expectations of liberation and salvation. Palm Sunday on the Christian calendar coincides with the week leading to the Passover celebration on the Jewish calendar. These days remind Christians of our connection with the Jewish faith and how both faith traditions look for God’s in-breaking in human affairs by the Messiah. Palm Sunday demonstrates how no amount of oppression can dash the hopes of a people who believe that their king will come.

A major theological theme of Palm Sunday is hope. The entry of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is the witness that God will not leave creation to continue in the status quo of power arrangements that rob persons of what the Divine intended, whether those power arrangements have Roman origin or Jewish origin or other origins. For African Americans who have often suffered from the power arrangements of the status quo, Palm Sunday is a day of hope and celebration that speaks to divine possibilities for change.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 12:12-15 and Psalm 37:32-33

Part One: The Contemporary Context of Interpreter

Governmental and religious polices can become the means of oppressing the very people these institutions were called to make life better for and serve. A war started under false pretenses has led to the loss of thousands of American and Iraqi lives and to a tragic waste of dollars that so many struggled to earn. The lack of regulation in home mortgage lending and the financial industry has brought on a credit crisis that almost yielded a total collapse of the global economy. There are many houses of faith that are more concerned with institutional survival than the justice of the kingdom that brings real peace, and this has led to growing skepticism that has seen more and more people discard institutional religion. In the face of, and perhaps in spite of, these harsh realities, persons look for leadership that expresses the heart of God.

When this leadership is found, the people will take the initiative to affirm it and celebrate it by declaring *blessed is the person that comes in the name of the Lord*. The unique relationship shared in the African American church between the pastor and the people comes as a result of the people's belief that the pastor comes in the name of the Lord. He or she is God's person sent to make God's will known and point the way to salvation. Palm Sunday is the continued celebration of the hope that God will send someone who accurately represents Him and comes in his name to a world waiting for change.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The key to understanding the gospel of John is in understanding the signs performed by Jesus that prove he is the Messiah. The writer clearly states this purpose in a section of John 20:30-31. "Now Jesus did many more signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God, and that, through believing, you may have life in his name." The triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover is seen as yet another sign that Jesus is the Messiah. The entry into Jerusalem shows that Jesus will not avoid places of danger or dangerous activity if both reflect he is doing the will of God. John's gospel clearly points to Jerusalem as a place of danger for Jesus because Jerusalem is the place where the Jewish opposition to Jesus' ministry is the greatest.

John's gospel places Jesus' confrontation of the corrupt practices of the temple priest at the beginning of the gospel as opposed to the synoptic accounts that have the temple cleansing event occurring during Jesus' final week in Jerusalem. The temple cleansing event that occurs earlier in John's gospel along with the rising of Lazarus from the dead makes Jesus popular with the masses and hated by the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders not only plan the death of Jesus but also plot to kill Lazarus because his resurrection causes people to believe in Jesus. One should never forget that within the crowd that meets Jesus in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday are those who do not celebrate his coming but plan to destroy him while he is in Jerusalem—a place of danger. There are times when people of faith are called to go to dangerous places to provide a witness for God even if some in those places plan evil and not good.

Dorothy Counts-Scoggins was the first African American to integrate the public schools in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1957. On the first day of school, Dorothy was met by an angry mob that shouted hurtful insults. But she entered anyway. A school house that should have been a place of learning was turned in to a place of extreme danger. This same scene was played out all over the south in the days after the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case that ended government sanctioned segregation in public facilities in 1954. Because of the courage of Dorothy and countless other young people like her, places of danger were transformed into places of hope and learning.

Because of the faithful actions of Jesus, the thousand who travel to Jerusalem today think of Jerusalem more as a place of hope than one of danger. Wherever people of faith are present, their presence should transform the space they occupy into a place of hope.

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is not only Jesus going to a place of danger but it involves Jesus engaging in dangerous activity. Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem leads to a crowd that was present in the city for Passover going out and meeting Jesus while waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna. The actions of the people clearly point to their expectation that Jesus would use his power to liberate them from the foreign oppression of Rome. Rome had killed more than its fair share of those who presented a threat to Roman rule. However, in our second text, Psalm 37:23-33, the writer makes clear that this is expected behavior towards one who comes in righteousness on behalf of the people: "The wicked watch for the righteous, and seek to kill them" (v. 32). So, we should never be surprised that the wicked are on watch and doing what they always do—seeking to kill the righteous. Such killing may be physical, as so many African American and other freedom fighters and even Jesus can attest. Most often, the killing is to one's reputation in an attempt to kill one's vision and dreams and passion. However, God is never asleep and is well aware of the ways of the wicked, so verse 33 says, "The LORD will not abandon them to their power, or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial."

One other thing is relevant on this Palm Sunday. What is often overlooked in this text is how palm branches serve as a symbol of resistance to foreign rule. In an article by J. Hart entitled "Judaea and Rome the Official Commentary," he states, "From time of the Maccabees palms or palm branches had been a national symbol. Palm branches figured in the procession which celebrated the rededication of the temple in 164 BC and again when the winning of full political independence was celebrated under Simon in 141BC. Later, palms appeared as a national symbol on the coins struck by the Judean insurgents during the first and second revolt against Rome."¹

For Jesus to enter Jerusalem amidst shouts of affirmation and waving palm branches could be seen as an act of defiance against Roman rule. What removes the hint of defiance is that Jesus rides in on a donkey and not a warrior's horse. This shows that God's plan of deliverance would not come by violence but would come through humility and love. It is hope, humility and love operating in an environment of danger that shows us what God can accomplish and how.

Challenge

The church is sometimes called upon to engage in dangerous activity, whether it is speaking out on issues of injustice or providing theological clarity about the church's purpose in a culture that craves entertainment. Palm Sunday is more than another day of celebration by the Christian Church as it awaits Easter. It is also a day of reflection on how the presence of believers in dangerous places can transform them into places of hope. Palm Sunday is God's reminder to us of what can be done when courage, humility, love and hope coalesce and enter places of danger and what can happen when those filled with these character traits engage in dangerous activity—this all leads to salvation.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The shouts of a crowd in celebration; the moving of the wind between palm branches;

Sights: A donkey making its way through a crowd with one lonely rider; wicked lying in wait for the righteous; the righteous on trial; and

Smells: The odor of sheep in the market place waiting to be sacrificed for Passover.

III. Additional Materials that Preachers and Others Can Use

Parting the Waters by Taylor Branch gives an account of the modern Civil Rights Movement and some of the people that helped to make it possible. These are examples of people operating in love and hope in dangerous places.

The Gospel of John by F. F. Bruce is a critical commentary on the gospel of John that provides theological and cultural information that can broaden one's understanding of Palm Sunday.

Strength for the Broken Places by James Harnish provides a collection of sermons on themes such as suffering, endurance, and sorrow that can be helpful to preachers during this season of the Christian Year.

Notes

1. Hart, J. "Judaea and Rome the Official Commentary." The Journal of Theological Studies. III 1952: 172-198.