

24 March 2024, Palm Sunday B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

The Liturgy of the Palms
Mark 11:1-11

The Liturgy of the Word
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 15:1-47
Psalm 31:9-16

Love Sacrifices; Love Saves

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

Not an hour ago, we joined others around the world and across time, back to the witnesses of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, in shouting "Hosanna!" a word that means "Save!" or "Save us!" We proclaimed the arrival of a Savior who would rule in love and mercy in God's name. We, like those who spread branches and cloaks on the road, declared that Jesus can save us.

Minutes ago, though, we joined a frenzied crowd in twice shouting "Crucify him!" The Jesus who brings salvation is the same Jesus whose execution the crowd demands days later. Only days separate "Hosanna!" and "Crucify him!"

We are not so unlike the crowd. It is easy to think of more recent examples of a person or group being able to get a crowd so frenzied that the crowd did and said irrational, unjust, and deadly things. I have to think that at least some people who cried "Hosanna!" were also in the crowd shouting "Crucify him!" Those who expressed such love for and hope in Jesus easily shift to condemning him, calling for Jesus' painful and horrific death.

Palm Sunday summarizes the journey we will take this week. We will bounce between witnessing and testifying to radical love in action and facing the suffering and sorrow all humans, including us, are capable of inflicting.

On Thursday, love will work through foot-washing, an act of intimacy that involves lowering oneself to care for another, putting them first. We will also experience love at the table as we, like Jesus and his beloved friends, share a meal that binds us together. Love will find its expression in the first commandment God ever gave us, given again and renewed by Jesus: “[L]ove one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Thursday’s story will also confront us with the human capacity to fall short of the commandment to love. Jesus’ beloved followers can’t manage to stay awake with him. They failed to grasp Jesus’ pain, and they did not attend to it. Others actively assisted in the perpetuation of injustice against Jesus. Some were complicit in standing by and doing nothing.

On Friday, we will face the depth of human suffering and of the human capacity to cause suffering. We will grieve as we witness an unjust trial and conviction, torture and mocking, and our beloved hanging in agony on a tree. This suffering, inflicted by human hands, is not a bygone event of long ago. We need only recall the lynching of Black people and those who advocate for civil rights in America or the torture and murder of Matthew Shepherd and other queer people, especially the mountain of murders of trans women of color.

On Friday, though, we will see love at its greatest. We will witness a God who loves us so completely that God gave Godself into our care. We will witness a God who withholds nothing of the Divine Being from us. We will see and know that God loves us so fully that, even as we fail to care for God with us, God continues loving us – even dying as a testimony to that love. We will witness a son, dying in agony, set aside his own pain to love and care for his mother. We will witness terrified, grieving people risk safety to care for the body of their beloved friend, lifeless but no less precious.

Why would God do any of this? Why would God make Godself smaller and give God’s being into our hands? Why would God trust us, even as we betray that trust repeatedly? Love. God loves us just that much. With this kind of love, no sacrifice is too great.

Many have wrestled and continue to wrestle with working out how exactly Jesus’ crucifixion leads to our salvation. That is, perhaps, a worthy endeavor, but let’s not miss the point. Whatever the mechanism of our salvation, God

did it and does it because God loves us. That's what love does. Love sacrifices. Love saves.

Love inhabits the shouts of "Hosanna!" – "Save us!" Love fuels Jesus' sacrifice and sustains him as he experiences unimaginable pain. Love emboldens Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for Jesus' body and then to wash and bury that body rather than leaving Jesus to rot in public. Love strengthens faithful women in accompanying Jesus, ensuring that he is never alone.

Love is the reason God doesn't use divine power to save Jesus from crucifixion, shield him from pain, or execute the executioners and their allies. That's what love does. Love sacrifices for others. And, in so doing, love strengthens, love sustains, love companions, love is compassionate, love saves.

Today, we get a condensed version of the story that will unfold over the latter part of the week. We will see immense love juxtaposed against profound wrong. We will feel tenderness and joy. We will feel grief and sorrow. At the end of the day, though, this story, the story of our faith, our story, is a story of love. It's a story of a love that knows no bounds and will go to any lengths because God love us just that much.

Love sacrifices. Love saves. Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Amen.