Triumph and Tragedy

Matthew 21:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the Bellbrook Presbyterian Church on April 17, 2011]

I

On Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at the village of Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

Thus ended the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil.

State against state,
friend against friend,
brother against brother—
it was (and in some ways still is) a conflict that literally tore our nation apart.

Five days later, on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, America’s most revered president, Abraham Lincoln, was shot and mortally wounded by John Wilkes Booth in Ford’s Theatre.

Lincoln hated war, but he was drawn into war because he believed it was the only way to save the Union.

On Palm Sunday the war ended—triumpth.

On Good Friday, Abraham Lincoln became the first U.S. president to be assassinated—tragedy.

II

Welcome to Holy Week.

Welcome to the triumph and tragedy of the six days preceding Easter.

That’s the kind of world we live in…
the triumphant end to a terrible war on Sunday…
the tragic slaying of the great leader who brought us through that war on Friday.

One moment we are on top of the world, believing that nothing can go wrong.

And then suddenly, literally, all hell breaks loose.

The triumph and the tragedy—
   Palm Sunday,
   Good Friday,
   life happens.

The amazing thing is that it happened to the Son of God.

   The One who was acclaimed on Sunday was crucified on Friday.

   Didn’t they realize who he was?

Sure, he emptied himself of his divine prerogatives when he entered the world as a tiny baby,
   but couldn’t they see his miracles?

   Didn’t he raise Lazarus from the dead?

   Couldn’t they sense he was no ordinary man?

He was Messiah,
   Savior,
   Redeemer…
   sent by the Father to save the world from sin and death.

   How could they miss it? How could they not know?

Maybe it was because he came riding into town on a donkey.

   How’s that for lowering expectations?

   Kings and generals ride on magnificent horses, not lowly donkeys.
Three centuries before Jesus’ Palm Sunday entrance, Alexander the Great, having conquered “Tyre and Gaza after terrible sieges . . . Jerusalem opened its gate without a fight.”

We can “imagine the victorious Alexander entering Jerusalem on his famous war-horse, the black stallion Bucephalus.” (Crossan)

When Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II visited Jerusalem, his entourage was so grand that he had to have the Jaffe Gate in the old city widened so that his over-sized carriage could pass through.

After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a large sign to the gate that read,

“A better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate.
He rode on a donkey.”

The Greek author Plutarch tells of one Roman general, Aemilius Paulus, who won a decisive victory over the Macedonians.

When Aemilius returned to Rome, his triumphant procession lasted three days.

The first day was dedicated to displaying all the artwork that Aemilius and his army had plundered.

The second day was devoted to all the weapons of the Macedonians they had captured.

The third day began with the rest of the plunder borne by 250 oxen, whose horns were covered in gold.

This included more than 17,000 pounds of gold coins.

Then came the captured and humiliated king of Macedonia and his family.

Finally, Aemilius himself entered Rome, mounted on a magnificent chariot, wearing a purple robe, interwoven with gold, carrying his laurels in his right hand.
He was accompanied by a large choir singing hymns, praising the military accomplishments of the great Aemilius.

That, my friends, is how a king enters a city.

Kings ride in limos, not in Yugos.

III
But the King of Kings?—he entered Jerusalem riding on a lowly donkey.

If he had consulted his political advisors, they would have been aghast.

What was he up to?

Leaders are supposed to project strength and power.

Think Ronald Reagan, not Jimmy Carter.

Jesus wasn’t listening to his political advisors when he made his entrance into Jerusalem that day.

Instead, he was listening to the prophet Zechariah, who envisioned the King of Kings, the Messiah, coming not on a great stallion, but riding on a humble donkey.

Jesus does not ride a stallion or a mare, a mule or a male donkey, and not even a female donkey.

He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable—a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her.

(Crossan)

Zechariah also foretold what this Messiah on a donkey would do:

he would “cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem... and he shall command peace to the nations.”

Zechariah foresaw it...Jesus fulfilled it.

No wonder Holy Week moves from triumph to tragedy.
The expectations of the people had been dashed.

They had voted for change they could believe in,
but now change was nowhere in view.

Besides, who can live with “peace to the nations”?

Bring the troops home?

Not when you have enemies who want to destroy you.

Even Jesus’ disciples expected him to exercise his kingship by vanquishing their enemies.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus tell the resurrected Jesus,
who walks along with them, but they do not recognize him,
that they had hoped that this Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel.
(Luke 24:21)

When Jesus appears to his disciples right before his ascension to heaven, the disciples are still asking,
“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

They want Jesus to establish an earthly kingdom make them his lieutenants.

Boy, were they disappointed.

They wanted Churchill and they got Gandhi.

And so some in the crowd turned away from him
and much of the crowd turned against him.

And some of the same people who sang their sweet hosannas on Palm Sunday shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” on Good Friday.

Triumph and tragedy.

Palm Sunday…
Good Friday…
the crowds turned their backs on the Son of God.

IV
The obvious question is, **would it be any difference today?**

Would we welcome Christ into our community,
    into our family,
    even into our church?

It is an unsettling question, but it needs to be asked.

Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge told of a woman in her congregation who would not come to church on Palm Sunday. Evidently the church did a dramatic reading of the Passion story.

This woman couldn’t stand being asked to shout, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

“I just can’t do it,” the woman explained.

Fleming Rutledge says,

“I always felt very sad for her. She had missed the whole point. She could have come to church every other Sunday of the year and she still would have missed the whole point . . . It was very important to her to think of herself as one of the righteous. She could not confront her own darkness. How sad this is. If she but knew it, there is great power in the act of repentance.”

Can we confront our own darkness?

Can we confront our need for repentance?

Would we welcome Christ into our world, our church, our lives?

For you see, Christ, the real Christ, comes as a disturber, an unsettler, as an upsetter of the status quo and the powers that be.

Think of the things we value—
    status….  
    power…
money…
image.

How does it all square with this humble figure riding on a donkey?

Not very well, does it?

Look at our popular heroes.

I’m thinking of the action-type movies preferred by most males 18-35.

How do the heroes of these movies—
Sylvester Stallone,
Chuck Norris,
Arnold Schwarzenegger,
Jean-Claude van Damme—
spend their time?

Blowing things up.

Avenging past wrongs.

Asserting their dominance over their foes.

Again, reconcile these images with that humble figure riding on a donkey.

Do we understand what it means to say Jesus is Lord?

It means that we need to examine our lives,

examine our goals,

examine what it is we are living for and ask ourselves,

is it enough?

Is this really the meaning of life?

Or is there more?

Is there an eternal dimension of life that calls us toward the heroic?
Holy Week should be the time for increased reflection and subsequent repentance as we measure our lives by our Lord’s life and death.

V

Triumph and tragedy….Palm Sunday and Good Friday…life happens.

The amazing thing is that it happened to the Son of God.

Would it be any different today? Of course not.

A few years ago Pastor Javier Viera and his wife Marianne wandered into the New York Historical Society to see an exhibit that had been recommended to them by a friend. The exhibit was titled “Without Sanctuary.”

It was an array of photographs and postcards which had been collected by a collector, James Allen.

These photographs and postcards were of lynchings that had taken place throughout the United States.

The exhibit is hard to talk about on Palm Sunday—picture after picture of limp, lifeless bodies hanging from the end of a rope.

The images were grotesque and disturbing.

“However, what was most disturbing about these photographs,” says Viera, “was not the bodies of the victims. In each picture was a gathering of ordinary people who came to watch the atrocities take place. The lynching was a social event. People dressed up for the occasion . . . It was clear that these lynchings were a cultural phenomenon. They were events not be missed. In [one] picture, as a body is hanging from the noose . . . you can see in the background a man smoking a cigar with a broad smile on his face. Others are sipping beer, gossiping, smiling and laughing. A couple flirts and enjoys a romantic moment. Little boys beam with broad smiles, seemingly filled with pride to be part of such an auspicious gathering . . . Something else was more troublesome yet than the fine, upstanding people in these pictures. The images of these events had not only been documented on film, they were also turned into postcards. They were cherished mementos to be mailed to family and friends...”
You and I are repulsed by these images, but I want to remind you that these are not images from Rome 2,000 years ago.

These are images from America 100 years ago.

And friends, the same dark heart that beat in the hearts of our ancestors beats within us.

As much as we would like to think differently, human nature has not changed in these past 100 years.

That is why any appeal to discrimination, prejudice, hatred against people of another race or another religion, or any other form of prejudice cannot be tolerated—

not by people whose Lord hung on a tree while mocking soldiers gambled for his garments.

VI
Palm Sunday…Good Friday…life happens.

It happened to the Son of God.

It still happens in our world today.

But here is what we must see:

while the cross of Christ reveals the evil humanity is capable of,

it also reveals the love God is capable of.

Ultimately, the story of Holy Week is one of triumph and tragedy, then triumph once again,

not only because of Easter Sunday, but because of Christ’s victory over sin and death.

This is why the cross is so precious to believers.

It calls us to repentance, but it also represents God’s grace which covers all our sins, even our most grievous sins.
Edward Grinnan tells a moving story about his mother.

His mother moved into an assisted living home after Alzheimer’s disease made it impossible for her to live alone.

She’d only been there a week when he got a call from the supervisor.

“I hate to tell you this,” said the supervisor, “but your mom’s been swiping things from other people’s rooms. Socks, candy bars, T-shirts. Nothing big, except that one lady’s cross is missing.”

Grinnan could scarcely believe this. His mom was the most honest person he knew. She once drove twenty miles back to a store where the clerk had given her too much change.

The next time he visited her, he gently chided her for the pilfering.

“You’ve got to cut that out, Mom,” he said, sitting with her in the lunchroom. “Did you take that cross?’

She shook her head.

“Sure about that?” he pressed.

His mother turned away, then reached into her purse and pulled out the small silver cross. She set it down on the table and stared at it.

“I wasn’t trying to steal,” was all the explanation she gave.

Later Grinnan turned over the cross to the supervisor, apologizing.

“Don’t, don’t,” she said. “Your mom’s a charmer. She’s just trying to hang on to the things that mean the most to her.”

The next time Grinnan came to the assisted living center he brought his mom a small silver cross. She stopped stealing after that.

Eventually he had to move his mom to a facility where she could receive more care and where, of course, she charmed everyone.
“She even led prayers on Friday morning. She had forgotten almost everything else, yet the prayers came to her lips as if she had freshly committed them to memory. And when she died, the saddest people of all were the people she prayed with on Friday morning with that little silver cross he gave her clutched in her hand.”

Her story gives new meaning to that line in the old Gospel song,

“I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown.”

VII

Triumph and tragedy.

They cheered Jesus on Sunday and on Friday they hung him on a tree.

But God had the last word.

God took that tree and made it a symbol of our salvation from the forces of sin and death.

**Triumph and tragedy, then triumph once again.**

**Thank God for the old rugged cross!**

Amen.

Sources:

