

THE PALM SUNDAY CROWD
Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday 2014
April 13, 2014
Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

When I was in college there was one year in particular when I came to know my faith in Jesus Christ in a better way. What happened was that my sophomore roommate that year started searching for something more in his faith.

He did this by not only attending worship and Bible studies, and by being involved in a Christian outreach group, but he also began attending a more Pentecostal group where there were things like speaking in tongues and lots of emotion in worship.

I remember how he used to come home from these meetings, throw himself on his knees in prayer and pray for hours, praying that he might receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He also began to question his Lutheran background.

He began to question his baptism, his confirmation, his home church. He also began to be very judgmental of churches and church people who didn't have the same beliefs, and who didn't have the same experiences and emotion that he did.

My roommate and I had many discussions together about these things and he began implying that my faith wasn't as right, pure or as good as his.

With his long prayers on his knees by his bed, along with his doubts and questions about the legitimacy of my baptism, I began to question my own faith. I began to wonder if I was truly a Christian or if there was something wrong with my beliefs.

I remember calling home one night and telling my Dad that I was wondering if I was a Christian, a follower of Jesus, or not? I remember how Dad very calmly asked me if I still believed in Jesus; if I still believed that Jesus died for me and for my sins; if I still believed that the covenant promise Jesus made with me at my baptism and which I affirmed at my confirmation, was true.

When I said "Yes, I believe Jesus is my Lord and Savior," my father reassured me that I was certainly still a Christian. Then he told me something I've never forgotten: to remember that my salvation is not based on my feelings, on how excited or holy I feel, but rather on the grace and love of Jesus, and on my faith and belief in him.

He reminded me that even though some have different views about baptism; even though some have different views about emotion and expression in worship; to never forget that God will never break his promises of love he makes to me every day, and that each day I simply am to renew those promises through repentance and faith.

My father also used an example of Billy Graham (Dad had worked with Billy Graham on the National and International Conferences on Evangelism—they had met and worked together several times). Billy Graham's wife, Ruth, was the child of Presbyterian missionaries to China.

As a Presbyterian Ruth was baptized as an infant—and she refused the need to be re-baptized. So Billy Graham often said that Ruth's faith, even though she was not a Baptist like him, was as solid as anyone.

My father helped to reassure me that I was still a Christian and helped me to keep growing the way I was. My roommate, however, kept running from study to study, from one Spirit-filled experience to another. He could quote Bible passages right and left, had a well-articulated testimony, and had even preached some sermons.

Yet he never seemed to be at peace. His religious activities seemed to be more of a have to than a want to. He was very hard on himself when he never received the gift of speaking in tongues while a couple of his friends did.

I sadly learned a few years after graduation that this sophomore roommate of mine is now a professed atheist—he proclaims to have no faith in God at all. I guess he never found what he was searching for.

The Palm Sunday crowd that we read about today was certainly made up of lots of people who were really excited about Jesus. They flocked to see him riding on that donkey; they shouted their hosannas with lots of enthusiasm; they placed their palm branches on the road. They rejoiced, celebrated and shouted together, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord."

Yet their excited and joyous experience of that Sunday, of being in that crowd, turned to disappointment as the week progressed. Those who wanted to stay on a Palm Sunday high, who were looking for some other sign or miracle, were ultimately disappointed in Jesus.

They were disappointed when Jesus did not raise up an army of people; he did not bring forth an army of heaven's angels to conquer the city of Jerusalem. In fact, he didn't do anything at all to have himself crowned as the new political king of Israel.

Also there were certainly those who were disappointed as the week went on; as the excitement of Sunday subsided; as people went on with their individual Passover meal celebrations; as there was no booming voice or miracle from heaven.

Therefore by the end of the week, when these people saw Jesus arrested in weakness and brought to trial; when they saw him being brought before the Roman magistrate Pilate—many ended up joining the angry crowd, shaking their fists and shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Then when Jesus was nailed to the cross on Good Friday, as he suffered and died, very few came to be with him other than his mother and a few close friends. The Palm Sunday crowd was nowhere to be seen. They deemed Jesus' mission a failure—they abandoned him on that hill.

One of the truths of Christianity is that it is often very easy to believe in Jesus when we're in a crowd of believers, when there is a lot of enthusiasm and strong spiritual emotions. Yet when we leave that experience; when life goes back to normal; when those daily struggles confront us, it is easy to forget about Jesus or to feel that Jesus has forgotten about us.

This is one of the reasons why studies have often found that many of those who have given their lives to Christ at evangelical crusades have often gone forward several times before. In the ups and downs of life they want that assurance, that same feeling again.

This is also why some people run from church to church, from one Bible study or worship opportunity to another, from one activity for their children/youth to another. They are searching for a spiritual high, for the perfect church or group, for something to give them peace.

Yet just like the Palm Sunday crowd there are many who want to jump over Holy Week and Good Friday to the victory of Easter. Many want their experience with Christ to always keep them on the mountaintop, to keep them away from the harsh realities and pain of life. They want that fulfilling marriage, great children, successful business, perfect church, with the least amount of work, or challenge, or disappointment.

How many people have we known who have been very active in their faith in Christ, but then when a tragedy, illness or disappointment has come they have then abandoned their faith? How often have we felt, as long as things are going well that then our faith is wonderful and strong? Yet when our fortunes have turned, our faith has turned to doubt and we have run from God. Have you ever expected that your faith should guarantee for you a life without pain?

The truth of Jesus, however, and of Holy Week, is that Jesus does not offer us that kind of faith and life. The truth is that just as Jesus had to go through the cross of Good Friday; just as he suffered disappointment, rejection and pain, we too may have to face these things.

Yet the good news of Jesus is that if we walk this road with him; if we go through our Good Fridays surrounded by his love; if we face our struggles and pain relying on him and on his strength, that he will lead us through to resurrection and new life.

Through Jesus and the power of his resurrection he brings life out of death, joy out of sadness, peace out of fear. He reassures us that the Good Fridays of life, as hopeless as they might seem, do not have the last word—for there is always Easter. He shows us that because he rose from the dead and lives again, we too can find renewal and strength for our life of faith.

The Palm Sunday crowd wanted a human king; they wanted wealth, success, joy. They wanted to jump over Good Friday to Easter; they wanted only the glory. Yet Jesus was not that kind of king—he needed to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. Yet as a result the crowds abandoned him; they left him all alone.

Well today, my friends, Jesus beckons you and me to not be like this crowd; to not shout our hosannas and then flee from him when the going gets tough. Rather, he wants you to stay with him this week, go with him to his Last Supper, stay by his side through his trial and sentence, and then go with him to his cross on Good Friday.

Jesus beckons us to go with him, to face our Good Fridays head on, to leave all our sins and pain at Calvary, to die with Christ to our sins. It is then and only then we will truly know the joy of Easter. Only then will we be resurrected to new life with Christ.