



*United Presbyterian Church
326 S. Main Street
Harrodsburg, KY 40330*

*April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday*

LITURGY OF THE PALMS

Blessed are you, Holy God, for in Jesus Christ you came to rule in our lives, not as a king, but as a humble servant, riding on a donkey. Enter into our hearts this day with your glory, that we may greet you with shouts of praise; through Christ, our Sovereign and Savior.

Matthew 21:1-11 / Year A: Palms

Gathering Around God's Word

Call to Worship:

L: Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

C: Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

L: Lo, your king comes to you;

C: triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Opening Prayer

Our most loving Father, take us from the worship of the world to that Holy Place you inhabit: a place of quiet rest: a place where you whisper to our conscience and our understanding. Open us to the whispered meanings found in silence, your word read, your word proclaimed and our willingness to follow. Let us follow a King who rode a humble donkey. Amen.

Call to confession

When the noise and the celebration of Jesus' final entrance into Jerusalem were over, Jesus took rejection and turned it into salvation. Let us pray that God can change our rebellion into acceptance. Let us confess our sin before God and one another using the following prayer.

The Prayer of Confession:

Lord, so often we have given you loud praise only to turn against you for our own reasons, later. Like the crowds, who cheered as you entered Jerusalem, then called for Your crucifixion, we too are fickle with our praise. Forgive us, Lord, and lead us to be faithful against all pressures, even death. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Moment of Silent Reflection

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the Good News. We believe Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. We know that means us. Let us be grateful for the gift of forgiveness. Amen.

Proclaiming God's Word

Prayer for Illumination

Let us pray. We thank you Father, for your printed word made available for all to hear or read. We remember those days when your word was scarce; translated into an old forgotten language. We thank you that we now have an abundance of translations in our language. Let us express our gratitude by listening with an open mind and heart and with willing actions. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson:

Isaiah 50:4-9

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The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

L: This is the word of the Lord

C: Thanks be to God

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The— crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

L: This is the word of the Lord

C: Thanks be to God

Sermon: *The Christian Scandal*

If it weren't true, the events of this last week of Jesus' ministry would be utter madness. Charles Colson once said, "All the kings of history . . . sent their people out to die for them. Jesus was the only king who died for his people." We believe in acquisition, winning and accomplishments as signs of success today. We put our heroes in parades seated on the back of shiny new convertibles with bands playing and crowds shouting.

What impact would a man on a donkey have whose only following seemed to be twelve, ragamuffin fishermen and other misfits? As early as the first century Christians had to deal with this scandalous message. Justin Martyr put it very clearly when he said, (Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion In the Ancient World and the*

Folly of the Message of the Cross, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1982, p. 37.) "They say that our madness consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in second place after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of the world." Pliny the Younger, writing to the Emperor Trajan in 112 C.E., calls the Christian faith a madness. He observes that after the examination of two deaconesses by torture he "found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition."

1. Christians have always faced this scandal squarely.

According to John's gospel, Jesus set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem. Given the preparation of the disciples reported by the evangelists, the manner in which the disciples were sent into Jerusalem to secure the donkey and later in the week the upper room, Jesus was under

no illusion about the outcome of this week. Like the preaching of the early church, Jesus rode squarely into the midst of the opposition, intentionally proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, deliberately challenged his accusers, set up his opposition, provided a betrayer, predicted his denial, and planned his execution.

The sacrifice of Jesus happens because Jesus makes it happen. He faces the humiliation of those who shout “Hosanna” on Sunday and “crucify” on Friday. He accepts the degradation of this ignominious defeat because he wants it to happen. The gospel writer knew, as did Jesus, that he came to die and he would not gloss over the fact.

Paul, in like manner, flies into the teeth of cultural skepticism and accepted practice. “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:23) It may have been that the early church sang about the scandal when they gathered to worship. Most interpreters believe that a section of Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-11) was in actuality an early Christian hymn. Listen to how they sang about the scandal. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

2. God works through contrasts.

We see the glory of God on a humble donkey. We see his glory in our Lord taking a towel and basin. We see it in the cross. Remember now, death on a cross was considered by most Romans' second only to being burned alive. As a form of execution, Roman citizens were exempt and it was not practiced on the Italian peninsula. Cicero said it was, “unfit for free men” and “it was the most brutal and dreadful of punishments that could be given to a slave.” In Persia where it originated, those crucified were left on their crosses for the vultures so that their “despicable bodies” would not contaminate the ground. Only because of the sensitivity of the Jews were they buried in Roman provinces like Bethany. One writer calls it, “horrific, disgusting business.” (Hengel p.1)

We Christians claim that this most brutal of all tortures is both the sign and seal of God's grace. Is this thinking not contradictory? How can God work through such opposites - death and life; pain and grace; cruelty and kindness? Yet our Bible is clear about the kind of God we worship. "See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god beside me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand." (Deuteronomy 32:39)

God works in ways hidden to us. That is why he seems so distant on occasions. In times of deep grief or trouble God seems so powerless. The reason that we perceive him thus is that his ways are not ours. Tempe Brown told the women of the Hill'N Dale Christian Church, Lexington, Kentucky "self and God are total opposites." She also said, "If you don't have love, charity, and mercy, you are nothing. So many of us think we do the right thing. We go to church every time the door is open. We got wet once, signed on the dotted line and thought, 'we're in!' But Christianity is not a membership; it's a relationship with the one it's named after."

In 1515 Martin Luther preached a sermon on the opposites of God. He said, "For what is good for us is hidden, and that so deeply that it is hidden under its opposite. Thus our life is hidden under death, love for ourselves under hate for ourselves ... salvation under damnation, heaven under hell ... And universally our every assertion of anything good is hidden under the denial of it, so that faith may have its place in God, who is a negative essence and goodness and wisdom and righteousness, who cannot be touched except by the negation of all our affirmations."

3. God makes love visible.

Jesus washes the disciples' feet so that they will remember how he loves them. Calvin (Commentary on John, page 54) explains the foot washing, "by this visible sign, that the love with which he embraced them was firm and lasting; that, though they were deprived of his presence, they might still be convinced that death itself would not quench this love. This conviction ought to be fixed also in our hearts."

Peter speaks for many of us who are not humble enough to turn our salvation over to God. Surely God should not wash our feet. We should do that, not God! Yet Jesus insists that we must have the humility to allow God to cleanse us. Calvin again faces the issue squarely (Commentary on John, page 58). "Peter thinks it inconsistent that Christ should wash his feet.

But the evil is, that, in refusing such a service, he rejects the principle part of his own salvation. . . We are all filthy and abominable in the sight of God, until Christ washes away our stains.”

God makes us to know our sin before we can begin to know him. Luther put it well when he said, “A true Christian must have no glory of his own and must to such an extent be stripped of everything he calls his own ... Therefore we must in all things keep ourselves so humble as if we still had nothing of our own. We must wait for the naked mercy of God, who will reckon us just and wise.”

Yes, the cross is a scandalous thing - God hanging there dying at the hands of sinful men. There is a bigger scandal today. First of all there is the scandal of good Christians like you and me who feel like we can understand it, use it, or even benefit from it without whole-hearted devotion to The Crucified. Church membership is not just a matter of being here and taking part in the worship, learning and giving to the church, it is taking part with Jesus in killing our sins and desires and accepting his ways. As Mrs. Brown said, “The first thing God said when we got saved: ‘Drop dead.’ ”

The second part of the bigger scandal is when we don’t share it. Do you know a “jerk?”—someone who rubs you like sand paper? That person needs Jesus Christ. Do you know someone who is in deep sin or trouble?—that person needs salvation. Do you have a relative, a friend, a neighbor who is a good person who does not know Jesus as their friend? — that person needs our fellowship. Introduce him or her. Bring them with you to his throne. Make love visible.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you for actions that you create in love that we cannot fully understand. We find a cruel death, like the cross, impossible to comprehend. Yet, when we realize that we do not love perfectly or give all we have, we understand some of your love for us. We can only gratefully say, "Thank you from the bottom of our hearts." Amen.

Responding to God’s Word

***The Affirmation of Faith: The Apostles’ Creed**

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the

right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession:

God in whom the heart's deep terrors are assuaged and the furrowed brow soothed to long-sought peace, hear our prayers for all whose darkest night still lies before them. No more than Christ are we exempt from deepest distress; no less than he are we granted the deep delight of your presence, when darkness yields to the great morning light. Hold tenderly in your arms all who are weary, embattled and shattered, until, strength spent, they become empty, open vessels to your Spirit. Then you will restore them, as surely as Christ rose from the tomb into everlasting light.

And now, with the confidence of the children of God, let us pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

Benediction

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen**