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**“A God Who Stoops”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard**

Passion/Palm Sunday

April 17, 2011

Ps. 118: 19–29; Matt. 21:1–11

Startle us, O God, with the story of what happened this day: a king coming in humility and vulnerability and with peace that passes our understanding. Startle us with the audacity of a faith based on that peace. Startle us with a love that comes all the way down to our city, our lives, our world, and bids us to embrace it and to follow the Prince of Peace, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Let us begin today by rejoicing with the children. We are blessed with a wonderful group of children of all ages in this congregation. The noted educator, Rodger Nishioka, our guest last week, observed how great it was to be in a church full of such lively children. Today we saw them in their liveliness as they waved palms and shouted, “Hosanna!”

My favorite Palm Sunday story is about the church where children paraded around the block on Palm Sunday before entering the sanctuary, waving branches, and shouting “Hosanna,” a practice that we do here. Well, that practice was discontinued mercifully after one bitter cold Palm Sunday morning where there were very high winds. One of the little boys got into the spirit by singing at the top of his lungs: “O Hosanna, O don’t you cry for me, ’cause I’ve come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee!” I simply cannot come to this day without thinking about that little boy shouting his “O Hosanna, don’t you cry for me”.

It is not just the children who make this day special. “Hosanna!” is the cry as Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem, but there is apprehension, fear, and misunderstanding. This may be one of the most theologically significant and relevant days of the church year because it is an occasion of such ambiguity and irony. The people who shout “Hosanna!” will later shout “Crucify him!” and to be honest about it, life is like that. There are huge issues and questions swirling around us, even as the little children sing hosannas and wave palm branches.

Peter Gomes died recently. I loved title he had held: “Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University.” Now that was a handle, wasn’t it? He was appointed to that important post in 1970, and Peter eloquently and faithfully represented the Christian faith to thousands of students and faculty at that important academic, political, and cultural institution. We were blessed by his friendship here in this congregation. He visited First Presbyterian Church on several occasions and preached in our pulpit. He said that he was brought up in the church that had a “let’s have a parade theory of Palm Sunday, that discreet form of Protestantism that could not bear the embarrassment or the indignity of the cross.”¹

We move from Palm Sunday to Passion Sunday, but Gomes says we turn the occasion into a festive dress rehearsal for Easter, “saving the suffering for the faithful few... who will come to church on Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday.”²

In her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes similarly, “I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb: everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you’re talking.”³

Why don’t we jump ahead to Easter? Why do we pause at the cross? What is the purpose of all this talk about the cross? Can’t we focus on something positive: the uplifting parts of the story, the loving grace of God, the mercy and forgiveness, the acceptance and the pardon? We would like to. We try. But frankly, as Fred

Craddock, the preacher and teacher, writes: “Sooner or later somebody is going to say to you, ‘Then what happened to Jesus?’ And when you tell them the truth, that he came to the city as a 33-year-old young idealist and stirred the city and the city turned on him and just like that put him on trial and executed him, some people are going to back away. Can’t we just leave that part out? Focus on the positive? People aren’t interested in a man who dies like that. It’s a terrible growth strategy for the church, all that, morbid suffering and bleeding and dying.”⁴

But yet, we live in a world where suffering and bleeding and dying are part of our daily agenda. Think of yesterday in our own community, when a tornado comes down and stays down for miles, bringing wreckage and death. Think of the people in Japan. Think of loved ones you know. How do we square all this suffering with the God who loves us and cares for us? Are these not the questions that we carry around with us every day? So why not on this week do we not follow the one who came to live among us, to share our lives, not in some superficial way, but totally, painfully, fully, lovingly?

The story of Jesus coming into the city is a poignant story. He does something very audacious: he comes in being greeted as if he were a king. Brothers and sisters, take my word for it: the Roman Empire did not miss that gesture. They were always on the lookout for people who might be seeking after power because that was the game they played, and they played it hard. He came, humbled and riding on a donkey, but nevertheless, greeted as the king entering into the Holy City, Jerusalem. And he had not been there very long before he went into the temple, which every pilgrim did. He went in and usually what happened is that a faithful Jew will offer a sacrifice on the altar. What did he do? He turned things upside down, threw out the moneychangers, and said their priorities were upside down.

This Mysterious One riding on a donkey has all of a sudden become very political, taking the stance of someone who understands the role of power, who understands people who get their priorities confused. And ever since then, members of the Church of Jesus Christ have been doing what some called meddling in politics.

We come by it naturally. We have been calling to question priorities that diminish those in greatest need. Like the budgets being proposed now in our state and in our

federal government. It is wrong to balance budgets on the backs of the poor. If you'll notice carefully, the programs not being cut are those that are benefitting those who have the most.

Following Jesus is a risky, dangerous, but also very important mission for us as God's people. It leads sometimes to trial and persecution and crucifixion. But that is the point of God coming to share our lives, not in some superficial way, but becoming part of our struggle to live as human beings, to care for all God's children, and especially the least and the lost and the lonely.

In one of the most important books of the last century, Jürgen Moltmann wrote *The Crucified God*. Moltmann remembers how the world changed for him in July 1943 when, as a 17-year-old conscript in the German army, he witnessed and survived the Allied firebombing of his hometown of Hamburg, in which civilian casualties numbered 40,000. As a young theologian, he asked, "Where is God in all this? Where is God in the suffering and pain of this world?" He remembers the day when he made the connection between the cross of Christ, the suffering of God, and the suffering of innocent civilians and Jewish people in the concentration camps.⁵

That's why we talk about the cross because Jesus did not suffer to keep us from suffering. He suffered because we already suffer. He suffered to show God's vulnerability, God's identification with us. We do not go seeking the cross. The cross already stands in the midst of life, and the question before us is will we be faithful to that cross. And if we are, it reveals to us a God who does not stand aloof, a God who does not wag a finger at us, but a God who empties God's self for us, who comes as close as possible to us to bring us hope and healing.

Fred Craddock, who I said earlier, is not only simply one of the best preachers but also scholar and teacher of preaching in America, writes with an elegant simplicity. He describes a most-common human occurrence: a child falls down and skins a knee or elbow and comes running to mother.

The mother picks up the child and says—in the oldest myth in the world—"Let me kiss it and make it well." . . . She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds

the child in her lap, and all is well. Did her kiss make it well? No. It was that ten minutes in her lap. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying. “Mother, why are you crying? I’m the one who hurt my elbow.” “Because you hurt,” the mother says, “I hurt.” That does more for the child than all the bandages and medicine in the world, just sitting in her lap.”

The story of Jesus coming to dwell among us begins on Christmas and ends on Good Friday. It is the story of God stooping to pick us up. We thought if there were to be business between us and God, we must somehow get up to God. Then God came down to the level of the cross, all the way down to the depths of hell. God still stoops, in your life and mine.

“What is the cross?” Craddock asks. “Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of God, who hurts because you hurt.” (*Cherry Log Sermons: Why the Cross*)

My friends, something profoundly true is happening on Palm Sunday as our Lord enters the city and, with great courage and a holy intentionality, lives out the last days of his life as one of us, betrayed and denied by friends, unjustly tried, suffered, died. Something tragic, but way beyond tragedy. Something terrible and awesome and beautiful beyond description is happening. Something the truth of which we know in our hearts—something about love becoming vulnerable, love exposing itself to heartbreak, something about the voluntary long-suffering of any love worth the name, something C. S. Lewis meant when he said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one.”⁶

Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday—this holiest of weeks in which Jesus suffers and dies is God giving God’s own heart to the world, to you, to each one of us.

So whatever you do this week, which on the surface is no different than any other week, find a way to pause and ponder and stand a while beneath the cross of Jesus and, with the faithful of all the ages, to sing:

Beneath the cross of Jesus
I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty rock
Within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness,
A rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat,
And the burden of the day.⁷

Let it be so with us. Amen.

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¹ Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1998, p. 69.

² Gomes, p. 69.

³ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005, p. 140.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 78.

⁵ cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God Yesterday and Today: 1972–2002*, In Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Passion for God: theology in two voices*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 69–85.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt, 1988, p. 121.

⁷ Elizabeth Cecilia Douglas Clephane, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 92.