

“Hosanna! Save Us!”

Readings from Mark’s gospel, chapters 11; 14-15

Margot Trusty Pickett

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Every year as we approach Palm Sunday I find, somewhat still to my surprise, that it continues to be one of my favorite holidays. Even though it is a very full day here at church, and we try to do perhaps too many things in one service as we seek to cover the last week of Jesus’ life, I love its complexity and range of human emotions. Of course we start with the happy excitement of that first Palm Sunday when people ran out on the streets to give Jesus a hero’s welcome. It was a first century version of a ticker-tape parade, with palms and coats on the road instead of confetti in the air. But then we move quickly to the end of the week where we are suddenly plunged into the depths of quite different emotions— betrayal, bewilderment, disillusionment, false bravado, anger, sadness, panic, fear, derision, and abandonment...and finally, an expression of faith from the most unlikely source: a Roman soldier who stood at the foot of the cross and watched Jesus die. It is this range, this depth of emotion that speaks to me and touches my life in all its complexity and depth and range of emotions, reminding me once again that this is exactly where God enters our world.

In our UCC Statement of Faith we say God enters our world in the person of Jesus Christ. The part we read this morning says: “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot.” In that one sentence we affirm both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. It is not that God stays seated on a throne somewhere and *sent* us Jesus, but that God entered into our world, came to us, became one of us, and shared our common lot. Those last 3 words might sound strange to you especially if you are new to the UCC. Having been part of the denomination for about 35 years now, they roll off my tongue. We say it a frequently, and we even had, up until the end of last year, a magazine “for the women of the United Church of Christ,” called Common Lot. It just means the same fate, the same existence, the same life. But when I looked it up on line, the most popular reference is to a restaurant in NJ with that name and they gave this definition: Common: something shared, communal, a tract of land for everyone...Lot: a crowd of people, abundance, plentiful.

So, we in the UCC, say God entered our world in the historic person of Jesus of Nazareth and shared our life in all its pain and glory, all its poverty and abundance, all its sadness and joy, **and** that what Jesus did was conquer sin and death and reconcile the world to God. Wow! And how did Jesus do that? It wasn’t by force or decree or by waving a magic wand of some sort. Instead, it was by doing the opposite of what people normally think is the way to get things done. It was by becoming vulnerable and laying down his life and transforming what appears to be weakness and defeat into amazing victory and strength. It is through the mystery of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

Of course, this is at the center of the gospel message and the story that unfolds in the week ahead.

Someone once said that on Palm Sunday Jesus entered the very heart of religion. In Mark's gospel this was the first time that he visited Jerusalem, the city that was the epicenter of the Jewish religion and nation. And Jesus chose the timing of his visit very deliberately. He came at the beginning of the Passover festival, the most celebrated and seminal of the Jewish holidays, when Jews re-enact the story of their liberation from slavery in Egypt in a symbolic meal. It is also a holiday that looks forward to the day when the Messiah will come and bring redemption and liberation for the whole world. In first century Palestine where Jews had lived under the repression of the Roman Empire for decades, this holiday was charged with underlying political meaning. It's been estimated that maybe two million pilgrims came to Jerusalem in those years to celebrate Passover and many of them were on the lookout for the Messiah who would overthrow the hated Roman rulers. Jesus, riding into the city on a donkey from the Mount of Olives—because it was the fulfillment of an ancient Jewish prophecy—looked to many in the crowd like he was the anticipated hero.

And so people dropped their plows and left their shops and hotel rooms and ran out into the city streets to welcome him. They ripped branches from trees and tore the shirts off their backs and laid them down in the road like a giant welcome mat. As he passed they shouted, "Hosanna!" which we sometimes confuse with the word "Hurrah!" but that really means, "Save us! Save us!" Notice that the next thing they say is, "Blessed is the kingdom of our ancestor David!" referring to the greatest monarch of Israel's history. On this holiday when they were celebrating their freedom from slavery in Egypt, a defining moment in their religious and national history, they were hoping and praying that the promised time of liberation had come, that their fortunes had turned, that God had remembered their plight and was about to save them and restore the Jewish monarchy.

Try to imagine for a moment what this might be like for the people who governed the city of Jerusalem at the time. We tend to think of Palm Sunday as a festive parade, with people dancing and singing in the streets, and perhaps they did. But this wasn't Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny they were calling out to. This was someone who was being welcomed as a rebel, an anarchist, someone the crowds hoped would overthrow the government, and usher in a new era of liberation, justice, peace, and prosperity. And this was cause for great consternation among those who were in power, trying to "keep the peace" and maintain the status quo.

And it's why Jesus was killed. Because he was a threat to those in power. Christians tend to talk about Jesus dying for us, but when we do, writes Richard Swanson, "we miss the full impact of saying that he didn't just die; he was *executed*." He was crucified along with other anarchists and criminals.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg emphasizes this point. He writes, "We as Christians participate in the only major religious tradition whose founder was executed by established authority. And if we ask the historical question, 'Why was he killed?' the historical answer is because he was a social prophet and movement initiator, a passionate advocate of God's justice, and radical critic of the domination system who had attracted a following. If Jesus had been only a mystic, healer, and wisdom teacher, he almost certainly would not have been executed. Rather, he was killed because of his politics—because of his passion for God's justice" (pp 91-92).

Borg goes on to outline five different ways he sees New Testament writers looking back and interpreting Jesus' crucifixion. I commend Borg's book and that particular section to you. It is only 4 or 5 pages long, but to try to review it today would be more than we have time for. But I do want to share his final paragraph in which he says what he believes about the cross. "I don't think that Jesus literally died for our sins," he writes. "I don't think he thought of his life and purpose that way; I don't think he thought of that as his divinely given vocation....But I do have faith in the cross as a trustworthy disclosure of the evil of domination systems, as the exposure of the defeat of the powers, ... as the revelation of the depth of God's love for us, and as the proclamation of radical grace." Even that is a bit much for us to try to absorb on a Sunday morning.

So let me try quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer the German pastor and anti-Nazi dissident who was imprisoned and ultimately executed by Hitler's government in 1945. While he was in prison he wrote some amazing letters to his friend and fellow theologian, Eberhard Bethge. In one he wrote about God's seeming absence in the world at the time, and then said this: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. [The Gospel] makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering." (Letter of July 18, 1944).

It is counterintuitive, it is a mystery, it is not the way we usually think, but God's power to heal the world and reconcile the world's people to each other and to God's own self, is through being incredibly available and radically vulnerable to the world. It is made real by confronting the world's hatred and oppression and inhumanity, and absorbing it and suffering for it. In this week ahead as we contemplate what this means for us and for the world, let's also ponder what William Stringfellow suggested it means for the church:

The Church exists for the sake of the world into which God enters and in which [God] acts and for which [God] expends [God's] own life.