

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
March 28, 2010
Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4–9
Luke 22–23: Selected Verses

THE PASSION AS LITURGY

We are entering into a very sacred seven days. Our palms will be the signal—the beginning of Christ’s journey. And we walk along side him. And we are also shouting Hosanna!

I suppose the closest we can come to understanding all that’s taking place on that day as Christ entered Jerusalem is if we could imagine having free tickets to the Oscars and we’re there when the limo drives up, and Tom Cruise steps out on the red carpet. That must have been how they felt, seeing the one so famous, the one so gifted and popular, the one who fed and healed and now had come to their rescue.

But because we know this story so well, we’re reluctant to shout with too much enthusiasm. Yes, we’ve been baptized into Christ’s resurrected life and first we were baptized into his death, but living his reality is something that has eluded us. Judas still lurks in our betrayals of one another. Oh yes, we show up at the supper, but just like James and John, we misunderstand the significance.

We’re still doing it, aren’t we? Wondering who has the best position, looking for ways that we might gain first rank. We make the same mistakes because we are just as neglectful when we go to God in prayer. All too often, we are still pursuing our own easy solutions—our formulas that excuse and justify us. And in the end, when the hard decisions have to be made, our loyalty fades as quickly as Peter’s courage. Our fidelity to God’s covenant—God’s promises to us—is as facile and empty as Pilate’s. And voices, other than the voice of truth, prompt us to agree with his verdict and even his sentence; to go along for fear that we might be being judgmental. At times we don’t even stop long enough to conscientiously choose.

And so we enter Jerusalem with all of this knowledge and all of our experience, and we don’t see what Jesus has accomplished—that he has put to death sin by his own death, that he has made right what is unjust by enduring a sentence when he was innocent. And he remains faithful despite all the hypocrisy around him, even among his closest friends. His humility still escapes us. His forgiveness somehow still seems too generous for our sensibilities.

When they came to the place that is called “the skull,” they crucified Jesus there with the criminals—one on his right hand and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing, and the people stood by watching. But the leaders scoffed at Him saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the messiah of God, his chosen one.”

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was an inscription over him: "This is the king of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged with him, kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the messiah? Save yourself ... and us." But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not hear God? You are under the same sentence and condemnation. And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong." But then he said Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise."

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Do we understand that Jesus is worshiping God? That he is praying to God, reciting scripture, even from the cross? There was a one-sentence prayer at the beginning of the crucifixion and a one-sentence prayer at its conclusion.

This execution is Christ's liturgy. He is repeating in his mind and in his words that he still trusts God. In today's passion and in next Thursday's memorial of those events, when I read the words, it still causes shivers to run down my spine. Each time, these crucifixion texts shake me to my very core. Betrayed, Rejected. Mocked. Abused. Treated like a criminal. And in the midst of all of that, Jesus' first instinct is still to worship, even while hanging on the cross.

He loves his enemies, even from the cross. He forgives those who put him there and prays for them—not some time after when he's had time to reflect—as it's happening, as he is suspended there, nailed to the cross. He even reaches out from that cross to someone else who is in need. He does exactly what he has instructed his disciples to do. He prays constantly. He confronts abuse and betrayal with obedience even from the cross.

Jesus did not save himself. But he did save others. Never neglecting the many as he saved one and never neglecting the one as he saved many. And all of this while he's hanging on a cross.

I want you to remember a few truths this week. My desire for us is that over and over again this week as we approach Maundy Thursday and endure the reality of Christ's death, we know without any question, Jesus died for our sins; and that when God raised him from death, it was to keep that sin beaten back and defeated in our lives. It does not have the power to control us any more.

And, I want you to remember that even though life involves suffering as well as joy, God does not leave us alone in that time. We are never alone. And when we can be honest about what Jesus did for us, that divine presence really does become a gift—not something that we dread, but something that we welcome in to our day-to-day conversations—as we think about all that happened on a cross for us. Amen.