

Palm Sunday
Year A, RCL
April 5, 2020
North Fork Ministries

Gospel:

Passion Gospel - Matthew

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I'm struck by the marked contrast between the Palms and the Passion. We start the service with Jesus' triumphant and joyful entry into Jerusalem. And then we usually enter the church, our laughter trailing off, and we put on our solemn faces and read of how Jesus was nailed to the cross, suffered and dies. How could things change so quickly? Everything seemed to be going so well. At one moment Jesus is riding atop a donkey, there are shouts of hosanna, people are spreading their cloaks and scattering palm branches, and the crowd is proclaiming, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." And then before we know it, Jesus is bound and standing before Pilate and this time the people are shouting, "Crucify him." And as the story is told in Matthew, events race ahead and Jesus is almost immediately hanging on the cross, crucified alongside two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. It's startling really – the way things can change so quickly.

But you know, that's really the way life is – joy and sorry, pleasure and pain, triumph and failure – all exist side by side. As your priest, I am acutely aware of the peaks and valleys of life, or the contrast between the hurricanes and the gentle breezes we know here on the North Fork. I've been called on to administer last rites for a dying parishioner, just moments after offering a joyful thanksgiving for the birth of a new child. I've married and buried on the same afternoon. And I've offered the consolation of baptism, our usually joyful symbol of new birth, to babies who will never draw a single breath of air.

I get to sit with those who have lost jobs and laugh with those who have found them. I'm allowed to be with those who are brokenhearted and then invited back when hearts are mended. Love is lost and love is found. Fortunes are made and fortunes vanish. Good health may abide for a season and then illness prevails.

It is the stuff of which life is made. Writ large on Palm Sunday, so that we can witness in the life and death of Jesus, the journey from a raucous ride astride a donkey through the streets of Jerusalem to carrying a cross to a place called Golgotha.

The journey through Holy Week has only just begun. Easter morning is still a week away. So what are we to glean from our reenactment of the glory of the palms and the devastation of the passion? Without immediately rushing ahead to the resurrection, what are we to take away from this moment.

Perhaps you've seen a young child experience absolute ecstasy - at the sight of a butterfly landing on a friend's nose, or at the prospect of a birthday party at Chucky Cheese. And then, in an instant, fall completely apart when her cupcake falls icing-down on a dirty floor. Young children exist in the moment, without the historical knowledge informing them that the bad things that happen in life do not necessarily portend the end of the world. And children give little thought to the fleeting nature of the moment's pleasure. For a child the present is all there is.

To live life fully we, as adults, must retain and cultivate that childlike capacity for living in the present. But our adult experience in the world gives us an advantage, a perspective, that serves to temper and shape our emotional response to what we perceive as either good news or bad.

As human beings we have the potential to realize our capacity to live fully in the moment and still hold a vision of the future. It is an essential element in our spiritual development as Christians as well – maintaining an awareness of God’s immediate and constant presence while holding fast to the vision of what is to come.

It is not an easy balance to maintain. Even the Christ, when darkness came over the land, was heard to shout, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is the question we may be asking ourselves on this Palm Sunday in particular, when the palm fronds are no longer waving in the air, and Jesus breathes his last and the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom. Yet even in this darkest hour, even in the season of Corona, we hold tight to a vision of what is to come.

And if you are having trouble, on this day, of holding on to that vision, let me give you a hint of what awaits us on Easter Sunday, “Jesus rises from the grave.”