

Sermon for Zion, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 25, 2018

Hymns: 218 (Hosanna, Loud Hosanna), 214 (All Glory, Laud and Honour);
217 (Ride On, Ride On, In Majesty); 352 (And Can It Be)

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Luke 19:36-48

Sermon Title: It Just Doesn't Make Sense

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Luke 19:36-48 - As Jesus rode along, many spread their clothes on the road. Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: "'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD!' Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples."

But He answered and said to them, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out."

Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it, saying to them, "It is written, 'My house is a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

And He was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him, and were unable to do anything; for all the people were very attentive to hear Him.

One brief Scripture passage – twelve verses, not even half a page, maybe a minute and a half to read – one brief passage, and we have the joy and celebration and triumph of the Palm Sunday parade, we have the Pharisees angrily telling everyone to be quiet, we have Jesus catching a glimpse of Jerusalem and bursting into tears, we have chaos in the Temple as the Money Changers have their tables turned, and we have the Chief Priests, Scribes and Leaders of the People wondering how to kill Jesus without upsetting anyone. Celebrations of joy to anger to tears to chaos to plotting a murder, all in a reading which took no more than a minute and a half. And we call it “The “Triumphal Entry,” this passage, and you have to wonder why.

Maybe it’s because things had been going so well. People had been healed, been set free, been delivered from those things which so cruelly crippled them. Words of peace and hope and love were being spoken with a power never before heard. News of a kingdom, a new kingdom, a just kingdom, a heavenly kingdom, were being preached from the mountaintops, and spread throughout the valleys. For one brief, shining moment, it seemed as though heaven was on earth, and followed the man from Nazareth like the light of a thousand suns. Things had been going so well. And then... well, what happened next just doesn't make sense.

We started this morning with the voices of children singing God’s praise, waving palms of joy, and we end with the plot to bring it all to a bloody close; we start with Hosanna, we end with the cross. But not too long after the parade, with the betraying kiss of a friend, the light of hope was extinguished, and the King of Peace was shackled and bound, dragged off into brutal captivity. Left behind were incredulous friends and followers, who had held such different plans for the one they admired so dear. The one who had preached of true justice was now to be crushed between the wheels of the law, was to be dragged through the muck and mire of all the cruelties and humiliations the human imagination could devise. Who can consider the life of this Jesus of Nazareth, can envision him one moment healing the helpless and embracing the lost, and the next moment heaving and gasping to the cheers of the crowd, and not shake their heads in utter and complete dismay? On the very deepest level, it just doesn't make sense.

Yet it is precisely the nonsensical which characterized Jesus' life and message. Where the death seems senseless, the birth of the King of Ages to a teenage mother and suspicious father in the cold dark of a forgotten barn in a back-water town seems utterly ridiculous, too. Equally ridiculous is the claim that no less than the power, presence and person of the Lord God Almighty, Creator and Ruler of all, was wrapped up within the red-faced, six-pound bundle of joy, crying in his mother's arms.

When Jesus, in his thirtieth year, finally began his public ministry, he did so by calling to himself a great band of followers, consisting of a few fisherman, at least one crook, a revolutionary zealot, and a nameless wanderer or two. Between them, they had

maybe three sticks to rub together, relying on some generous women to finance the affair. Along the way they picked up a few more souls, none of whom were the type considered to be the "in" crowd. That was about it; that was the retinue of the heavenly King, in all of its glory and pomp. They even had to borrow a donkey to make a grand entrance, when the time came. Ridiculous.

But it matched the message. The message made about as much sense to average listeners as the rest, and went against the grain of how things should be done just as much as the choice of followers did. *"You are particularly lucky,"* Jesus would preach, *"if you are poor, and downtrodden, and weak. You are particularly lucky,"* Jesus would preach, *"if you are not cursed by wealth or status or power. God particularly cares for you, has a special blessing for you,"* Jesus would preach, *"if you are not like those religious guys, who spend all day praying loudly at the Temple."* The people ate it up, and the powerful spit it out, and resolved to put an end to this unhappy farce. After all, to any reasonable person, these words, this preaching: it just didn't make any sense.

Nor did it make sense when the blind were made to see and the deaf were made to hear and the lame were made to leap and shout and carry their sick beds home. Nor did it make sense when the thousands were fed and the lepers made whole and dead brought back to life. Nor did it make sense when he trotted into the great city of God as its conquering hero, riding at a crazy angle on a colt smaller than he was, the people waving leaves and shouting welcome to the King. *"Hosanna! This is God's man, come to save the world!"* shouted the crowd. To the chief priests looking from the window of the temple, it seemed as though the whole world had turned upside-down. It just didn't make sense.

It didn't make sense that night as Jesus gathered his disciples around him and shared a Passover feast and called the bread his body, the wine his blood. It didn't make sense when one of those disciples ran out of the room and sold his friend, sold the Lord, sold the King of all creation for a pocketful of silver. It didn't make sense to Pilate when he asked Jesus to say something in his own defence, anything at all, because he knew just by looking that this fellow hadn't done anything wrong, because he wanted to let this man go, and tried what he could to do it, but Jesus wouldn't speak up for himself, wouldn't say a single thing in his own defence. And it didn't make sense to convicted killer Barabbas, Public Enemy Number One, that the crowd should choose him to be let loose, rather than the one they had all lined up to cheer just the day before. It certainly didn't make sense to Peter, to his friend Peter, who sits in the courtyard, dazed, and denies ever having known him at all.

And that brings us to the Good Friday story (there's a name hard to make sense of right there), as we stand in the crowd and jostle for a good look and crane our necks to see this bloody wreck of a man drag his cross around the corner and stumble as he looks to the

hill before him, as he is crushed beneath the weight of hatred and curses and insults and jeers that we hurl as he staggers by. It's all a little too much. It just doesn't make sense.

Nor does it when he looks down from his cross and asks forgiveness to those who nailed him there. Nor does it as he breathes his last and the earth shakes and the rocks break and the sun hides its face from the world. Nor does it as the women hastily wash his tortured corpse and wrap it in cloths for a last-minute borrowed tomb, then to return to the others and grieve, hidden with those who loved him and abandoned him at the last.

Nor does it make sense when three days later one of those same women returns to find the stone rolled away, the cloths cast aside, the tomb empty, and the whole sky filled with the light of the Resurrection power. It did not make sense to Mary, as she saw walking towards her, walking with outstretched arms, the one whom she had buried just three days before, the one who would never die again, the one who had defeated death at death's own game. It didn't make sense to the disciples as Jesus appeared in their midst, alive; alive; as he held out to them his hands, as he held out to them the promise of life, the power of God, and the joy of Easter morning.

The story does not make sense because the world does not make sense, the world in all of its sorrow and hunger and cruelty and pain. The story does not make sense because to destroy death and all the powers of darkness, God had to prove once and for all that not even all of the misery and horror the world could dish out, could defeat what he had set out to do, and that was to reach out to all those who had lost their way, to reach out to all those who lived in the midst of all that had gone wrong, to reach out to those who had tasted the horrors of pain and of fear and of death, to you and to me, and to offer us a chance, a fresh start, a clean slate, a new life; to reach out to us with a Father's love, and offer to bring us home.

God's plan was and is to recreate the world, to recreate the Kingdom, to recreate us, and the ones who would do it would not be the rich and the powerful and the great and the mighty, but would be the Marthas and Marys and Matthews and Peters of the world; would be you, and would be me.

It is a wild plan, a ridiculous plan; it is, as no less than the Apostle Paul says, a foolish plan. *"Looking at it from the outside,"* says Paul, *"it doesn't make any sense. Looking at it from just about any other point of view,"* says Paul, *"it just stops you cold. Let's face it,"* says Paul, *"it's not a wise plan, it's not a prudent plan, it is a foolish plan."* And yet, says Paul, it is, nonetheless, God's plan. The plan which will lead us to salvation. The plan which will bring us all home. And with the same power which rolled the stone of the tomb aside and raised the Carpenter from death, God will bring his plan to fruition. With the likes of you, and with the likes of me.

And all because so long ago, the same Jesus who rode in to the cheers and waving palms and celebration, is the same Jesus who shouldered the cross and carried through to

the end, so that with his sacrifice and by his love, we need never be alone, we need never fear, we may always know God's love.

No, the story makes no sense. But you know, love often doesn't. Love has its own logic, its own reason, its own sense, and God reaching out to us in Jesus Christ makes sense only when the truth and wonder of that love burns brightly in our hearts. Only when we say "Yes" to God do the scales fall from our eyes, do our souls shout "Hosanna," do our hearts understand: that behind the nightmare of the cross is the unfathomable glory of the empty tomb; the unstoppable wonder of love. Only then do Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday belong on the same day; only then is the story made real; only then does it all make sense.

This Easter, as we journey from the shouts of praise to the Upper Room; from the cross on the hill, to the empty tomb; may God open our hearts to his love, our Spirits to his life, and our minds to his wonderful story. It may just make sense after all. Amen.