



ON OUR WAY TO PALM SUNDAY

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek

Lent 5, Year C

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Ventura, California

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“Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters...” We heard this quote in our first lesson this morning. Isaiah begins this passage by reminding us, and all those who have read from it since the time it was written, that our God is a mighty God. Our God is the God of our ancestors; who brought them out of slavery in Egypt by making a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters.

This is the beginning of a message of hope proclaimed to a people who were desperate and desolate; feeling they had been abandoned by God. These were living in exile. They'd lost everything. Driven from their homes, away from the families they loved and the land that had been given to them by this mighty God. And there they sat wrestling with some really important questions, “Why did God abandon us? How is it possible that such bad things could happen to the Chosen People of God?”

We still struggle with questions like this today. When we face the crisis' of our lives we often wrestle with these serious theological questions. “How could an all-powerful, loving, forgiving, life-giving God have allowed this to happen?”

Turning to scripture can help. Let's look at this message of hope and encouragement that these frightened people held on to during a dark and desperate time in their lives. Perhaps it can shine some light on how we might handle the dark times in ours.

What is it the Lord said to them? “...I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...”

From this time of darkness in this place of desolation, God promises new things will come; things so amazing and hope-filled that they will be like water that springs up in the wilderness or rivers that form in the desert. From them the people will drink and be refreshed and satisfied. They will find hope and the strength to carry on.

Our Gospel passage this morning is also set in a desperate time. It is 6 days before the Passover and Jesus has gone to visit his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Today we are in the Gospel of John and we find ourselves just outside of Jerusalem. It's nearly time for Jesus to go riding into town on a donkey, hailed by crowds shouting, "hosanna in the highest!" and, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

That's where the story will take us next week. We, too, will wave our palms, symbols of victory, as we remember and take our place in the seven day period we now know as Holy Week. For those who can only join us on Sundays, we'll tell the whole story during next week's service. We'll read the Passion and remember Jesus' last days and his suffering. And, though our service will begin as a joyful celebration, it will end in sorrow and silence.

On Holy Tuesday, our clergy will gather with those from all over the Diocese to renew our ordination vows and bless the holy oil that will be used to baptize, bless and anoint people throughout the coming year.

On Holy Wednesday, we will offer healing prayers and Eucharist at 9am. You are all invited to join us.

On Maundy Thursday, our service begins at 7:30pm. Come as we offer the washing of feet and remember the mandate, the commandment Jesus gave at the Last Supper, "Love one another as I have loved you." And watch or help, as everything holy is removed from the sanctuary or draped in black.

Beginning at 9pm on Maundy Thursday and running through the night we will keep the watch in one hour shifts. The watch will continue through the morning while some of us gather to walk the Labyrinth by candlelight.

The watch will continue until the service begins at Noon on Good Friday.

At 3pm, the time when we remember Jesus breathing his last, the church bells will ring and the doors will be locked.

At 7pm, we will offer a very special version of the Stations of the cross. At each station we will each be given the opportunity to experience a piece of the story. We'll build a life size cross and carry it from station to station.

Our first Easter service will be the Great Vigil of Easter – a beautiful service that begins with the kindling of the new flame and the retelling of some of the foundational stories of our faith. We'll renew our baptismal vows and proclaim the coming of Easter in a glorious celebration. Sunday morning services will be at the usual times, 8am and 10:15am, and they will be amazing!

That's what next week holds. This week, we find ourselves in the home of Jesus' good friends who live in Bethany, a town on the hillside overlooking the Temple in Jerusalem. Here they enjoy some fellowship and a meal served by Martha.

We don't know what they talked about, but it is likely they were all very concerned. Jesus had been warned time and again to stay away from Jerusalem and he, himself has explained why it would be dangerous to go there.

They know where he's going and they know what it means. If there was any chance for Jesus to avoid this fate, he needed to lay low, to be careful not offend the authorities, and to stay out of trouble. But not only did he continue to teach and preach to crowds that followed him, he went and raised Lazarus from the dead.

Now, he was pretty well known already, but after that, word spread far and wide putting his life in even greater jeopardy.

So, gathered around the table that night, they knew there was trouble ahead. They didn't have much time left and what do you say at a time like that?

Like the ancient Israelites who had been forced into exile, maybe you question how God can allow such things to happen. Maybe you get angry and rant and rave about the injustice of it all. Or maybe you comfort one another with the words of scripture and remember that the Lord said, "...I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert..."

We aren't told what the others did. We only know how Mary responded. She uttered not a word. But simply knelt down and anointed Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume. In preparation for his act of extravagant love and sacrifice, she humbled herself and silently offered her own extravagant gift of love.

And if Mary is the faithful disciple in this story, then Judas is the unfaithful one. We are told parenthetically that he objected, "Not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it." This is tough for me because I can see myself being upset by such an extravagant act as well.

This jar of perfume was worth as much as a whole year's wages. How could she pour it all out? Couldn't she have used a little kept some for later? Or used just half?

But see what I'm doing? Now I'm rationalizing, I'm bargaining; trying to decide how generous to be. Mary didn't hesitate. She gave all that she had.

By the way, I don't see Judas as a bad guy. I see him as a human being - which means he is sinful and flawed just like everybody else. He was tempted by the things we are tempted by; greed, power, being recognized as one who is "in

the know.” I see some of him in myself and find comfort in remembering that Jesus loved him too – but that’s a discussion for a different time.

For now, as we move ever closer to Jerusalem, closer to Holy Week, may we find comfort and hope in the idea that the Lord is about to do a new thing, not only in this story we know so well, but in us and for us.

May we come through this Lenten season having developed an improved connection to the Spirit and enhanced ability to perceive such things.

And when the time comes, may we be willing to kneel down and offer ourselves wholly to the God who made great things spring up in the lives of our ancestors and who longs to do the same for us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.