

Sermon – Via Dolorosa
Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017
Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Matthew 21:1-11
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah, chapter 50, verses 4-9a. We read one of Isaiah's suffering servant songs on this Sunday because as Christians, we understand Jesus of Nazareth to be our suffering servant. One cannot help but note in this psalm the confidence in the one who suffers. The servant is able to endure suffering because he knows God as savior. This reading is timely on this Palm Sunday as we remember Christ's "Via dolorosa," the road of sorrow Jesus chose as he entered Jerusalem the week before his death. Hear now God's Holy Word.

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning God wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; God who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? Amen.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in chapter 21, he paints a colorful portrait of Jesus by quoting the words of the Prophet Zechariah. Beyond the description of the details of the parade, the cloaks, the branches, the hosannas, Matthew emphasizes the gentleness and humility of Christ, who knows the way home will not be easy, and yet, who is determined to accept what lies ahead with courage, dignity and grace. Hear what the Spirit is saying through Holy Scripture.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Amen.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the meditation: “Via Dolorosa”

The text: “...I did not turn backward.” Isaiah 50:5b

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, Give each of us the courage to journey with grace on the way of our lives, especially when the road is sorrowful. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Scholars do not know with any certainty who the figure of the Suffering Servant is, whether a particular prophetic individual or an idealized Israel; however, it is understandable why the church finds it applicable to Jesus and particularly appropriate as we enter Holy Week. It highlights Jesus the teacher, who first listens, ever attentively to the voice and will of God, and who came preaching and teaching with a special concern for the poor and the weary, calling out to all who were carrying heavy burdens. Again and again in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is presented as the teacher, going up the mountain and teaching upon the mountain about the kingdom of heaven. (*Seasons of the Spirit, Year A, Volume 2, page 161, James A. Wallace*)

It was at a gathering of Presbyterian teachers that I heard the Reverend Dr. Tom Troeger, a preaching professor, poet and flutist who recently retired from Yale Divinity School, challenge those assembled to come to the mountain. The first mountain we are called to climb is the “Mountain of Mystery.” The story of the burning bush that is not consumed on the side of the mountain beckons to each of us that sense of awe and wonder being in the presence of God. The second mountain to which we are called is the “Mountain of the Torah.” The law, which was given on a mountain, provides the necessary boundaries and limitations that enhance and broaden life.

The final mountain is the “Mountain of Suffering” and this is perhaps the most compelling call of all. Come to the mountain! Travel the Via dolorosa! Enter the way of suffering! We are beckoned. We are challenged that if we want to be true to the gospel, if we want to be faithful to God’s children, to those of us gathered on this Palm Sunday, we must address suffering in our world. If we teach only happy faith we do not teach biblical faith. If we remember only the shouts of Hosanna we cut short the way that leads to Easter.

Not only is suffering at the heart of our faith, it is also at the heart of our shared humanity. We are only faithful when we acknowledge that suffering is a part of life. If we risk in being human, in loving, in serving, in celebrating life, in living with integrity; we will know sorrow, loss and disappointment.

Part of the wonder and mystery of our faith is that we belong to a God who shared our humanity. Because Jesus walked this way, we can walk with courage and strength...and we can share in each other’s suffering. We share, not with religious cliches that protect us from another’s pain, but with psalms of lament that cry out in the pain and abandonment along the way of suffering.

Via Dolorosa literally means “the way of sorrow.” When all the letters are capitalized this Latin phrase means “Christ’s road to Golgotha.” Today, people around the world wave palms, offer their cloaks, and cry hosannas to commemorate the journey Jesus risked because of love and integrity more than 2000 years ago. The events in the days that followed surely were unexpected by those who cheered and welcomed their Messiah as he humbly entered Jerusalem.

Some of us may ask—where were these supporters when Jesus really needed them further down the road? I suppose a part of their absence has to do with fear, uncertainty and the extent people will go to avoid pain. Another part of their absence is simply this. All our “roads of sorrow” are traveled alone. Why would Christ’s be any different? When our life journeys take an unexpected turn and we find ourselves in the valley of darkness, disappointment or the realization that integrity requires sacrifice, we can cry out with confidence and we can walk with courage, not only because we believe that God is our Savior, but also because our Savior God has walked this way as well.

When we are children we learn that Christ died on the cross to save us from our sins, and this indeed is theologically correct. The more life we experience, however, the more we come to appreciate the meaning of Christ’s road to Golgotha. Christ did not travel this path to save us from traveling our own, but rather to show us the way—to encourage and strengthen us along the way of a life that calls us time and time again to give up a part of ourselves in order to grow. Christ calls us to give up our wishes, our securities, our biases and prejudices... our illusions. Life is a series of deaths and rebirths on the journey toward wholeness. For us to grow through a new perspective means an old one must die....sadly this is not easy...as W. H. Auden articulated so succinctly.

*We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.*

Via dolorosa is the road of sorrow that leads to new life. May we walk this way in the confidence of the One who walked this way before us, the teacher who sustained the weary with a word, who listened each morning to the Lord, his God, and who “...*did not turn backward.*” By the grace of God, may it be so for each one of us. Amen.