

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
on March 25, 2018, Palm Sunday, Year B

On that first Palm Sunday Jerusalem was in the mood for celebration. It felt kind of like the excitement at St. John's this morning. The streets were jammed with people who had come from the four corners of the world for the Passover feast. The Holy City was in a frenzy of activity, voices pitched a little louder in the face of all the crowds, children scampering around, people gathering to greet each other. There was heightened expectation, talk of Messiah in the air, some rumors about a rabbi from Galilee. They knew their Scripture, this crowd. They knew what Zechariah had prophesied, "Behold your King is coming to you, humble and mounted on an ass," and then they saw him, the one called Jesus of Nazareth, and behold, he was entering the city on a beast, just like the prophet had said.

Some spread their garments on the ground; some cut palm branches and made a carpet of them. "Hosanna," they cried. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" It was a parade, and everybody loves a parade. Sometimes it doesn't even matter why you're there, you just get caught up in the fun of it all. But Jesus didn't respond to the cheering; he didn't wave like a politician or shout out his greetings. He rode on silently, knowing that this was no victory parade; he had told them that, but they didn't believe him; he had told them that this journey would lead to his death.

And so the crowd turned on him; they didn't want to follow anybody to their death. Give us Barabbas, they say, give us a zealot to revolt against the Roman occupation. And so Pilate releases Barabbas, and Jesus' punishment was executed, pounding nail into flesh as he lay there to be mocked, to be scorned, and then to die.

The scene is replayed over and over when we wave our palm branches around and don't come back until the Easter lilies deck the church next week, when we move from today's triumphal procession to next week's Resurrection party and forget that the first procession leads to a cross on Calvary before it leads to Easter. Could you not watch with me an hour, Jesus asks, and we say no. No, we're too busy getting ready for Easter, the relatives are coming and we have to get the eggs dyed. Could you not come and remember why I got nailed to the cross? Well, we're not eager to do that, Lord, with all the blood and pain, and so we walk away when today's pageantry is over and before the hard work begins.

It is a funny thing, but when you are dying, the important thing isn't the parade but the cross. You want somebody to listen to your fears and tell you that your life matters, not that every little thing's gonna be all right. It is a funny thing, but it is through Jesus' death, ugly as it is, that life is offered to us and hope is poured into our hearts. What matters is that our God loves us enough to die for us. What matters is that God sent Jesus Christ to hang beside us on all the crosses of our living and all the crosses of our dying too. What matters isn't the party, but that somebody loves us when the party's over.

I have watched people face death. I have watched the anguish of those that die and the agony of those who have to see them die. And I have also seen those who surround the dying gather together to support each other and believe for each other and hold each other up and dare to remember their faith in Christ's promises. And then it happens that the unbearable pain becomes bearable and they remember that they

are not alone, that there are two on the cross, because in our living and in our dying, Jesus promises that we will never ever be alone.

“Could you not watch one hour with me?” asks Jesus. Could you not be there for the crucifixion as well as the parade? God did not ask the crowds to rescue Jesus from the cross. He just asked them to accompany him and wait there with him and see what he would do for them. And that is what God asks of us.

God asks those of us who come to this parade today to keep on walking to Calvary, to walk the Way of the Cross, to wash feet on Maundy Thursday and strip the altar bare, to pray the stations on Good Friday, to be there with Jesus, to live the story of his passion and death. And maybe the reason that God asks us to do that is so that we can learn how to be Christ’s presence at the crosses of today: learn to listen to the bereaved, learn how to sit by sickbeds, learn to hold the hands of the anxious, to hold out hope for those who are getting divorced and those who have lost their jobs, to dream dreams for the despairing, to engage the lonely, to look the poor and homeless in the eye and greet them. When there are no quick fixes, no easy answers, we are asked to walk with those who go through the valleys of fear. That is a hard thing for people who want to fix things and make them all better, people who like solutions and plans, construction and parades. But then I imagine that Jesus preferred the parade to the cross too.

Could you not watch with me an hour? Could you not stand beside me as I offer you my body and blood as a sign that I am with you always? Could you not be there to cry when I die? Could you not hope that I will not be gone forever? Could you not stay a while after the parade?