



SERMONS THAT WORK

Palm Sunday (C)

Proving Scripture Wrong

[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 or Luke 23:1-49

Palm Sunday is an invitation of the most extreme kind. If you picture a polite and proper written invitation to an important event, it's usually on pretty, white paper and arrives quietly in your mailbox with a diffident request for an RSVP. Palm Sunday is an invitation to events that shatter the status quo and reconfigure the universe, and it arrives with strikes of lightning, booms of thunder, and crowds shouting themselves hoarse in the streets of Jerusalem.

We are here now to make our answer to the invitation of Palm Sunday. Jesus is hailed by the crowds today, and we throng along with them, waving our palms with bright, self-congratulatory allegiance to our matchless king.

And then we have a choice. Many of us will go home and not darken the door of spiritual encounter until Easter Day. But that is a mistake.

Notice verse 12 of Psalm 31, our psalm for today. "I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind." In some ways, this may be Jesus' greatest fear. He has spent three years on Earth teaching, healing, leading people to God, to liberation, to new life. Today, on Palm Sunday, we all shout out his name with Hosannas. He is clearly top of mind.

But he knows that the time is fast approaching when we all will desert him, right along with the rest of the disciples. We will want to forget him, by that point. It's too great of a trauma to see our teacher and friend arrested as a criminal and subjected to torture at the hands of a cruel and distant state.

"I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind," the psalm says. That is exactly what the chief priests and scribes want. We read in the Gospel of Mark, "The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'"

They don't want people holding on to their allegiance to Jesus. It's too dangerous. The Romans are already losing patience with the Jews and their ongoing parade of political Messiahs who cause disturbance and unrest. And Rome solves its problems with violence. The chief priests and scribes know that everyone will be better off, safer if Jesus is simply forgotten.

And that's the question we're being asked today. When we walk out of these doors or click close on our browser window, will we forget Jesus? Will we abandon him? Will the empire of noise and news, of wealth and power, claim our uninterrupted attention for the next seven days, so that the Resurrection is a blunted anti-climax marked only by Easter eggs and dressy clothes?

That can't be all we have to offer. That can't be all the courage we have.

The psalms are always the place to go for the raw, unvarnished emotional truth of the Biblical experience. Jesus knew the psalms. He spoke and prayed and sang the psalms in his teaching and in his own worship life, and when his entire world crashed around him, when he felt abandoned even by God the Father on the Cross, it was the words of a psalm that he cried out in his agony: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That question comes from Psalm 22.

And so, we can trust the psalms to teach us about Jesus, his life, his heart, his world. Try to stand in Jesus' shoes at this moment, on Palm Sunday, toward the end of the day. The crowds welcomed him into Jerusalem, waving palms and laying their cloaks in the road before him. Everyone was joyful, exuberant. The disciples felt like their moment finally had come; Jesus was going to take over Jerusalem and show the Romans who was boss.

Now it's the end of the day, and the parade is over. The crowds have gone home to make supper, and the pilgrims and others from outside the city like the disciples have found rooms at inns or courtyard corners to bed down in. Campfires crackle, and quiet conversation travels on the cool evening wind.

And where is Jesus? The colt has been handed off to someone, and the hundreds surrounding him have dwindled to the Twelve, the women, and a few other friends and followers. Everyone is laying out bedrolls and stirring pots over fires, and no one notices Jesus drifting away out of the warm circle of firelight to stand alone, gazing out at the quieting city under the stars.

Words start to arise in his heart, words that he has read in Psalm 31 since he was a boy: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my throat and my belly." Why should he be consumed with sorrow? Did he not just receive the welcome of a lifetime from the city of Jerusalem, the heart and soul of his people? But Jesus can't fool himself. He knows what is coming, how brief their passion for him will be.

"For my life is wasted with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails me because of affliction, and my bones are consumed." What must it have been like to try to summon the strength to face the days ahead? Did he know he had less than a week to live?

"I have become a reproach to all my enemies and even to my neighbors, a dismay to those of my acquaintance; when they see me in the street they avoid me." They love him now, but once the danger becomes clear, they will flee like rats on a sinking ship.

“I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; I am as useless as a broken pot. For I have heard the whispering of the crowd; fear is all around; they put their heads together against me; they plot to take my life.” This is where Jesus is at the end of the day on Palm Sunday. The task that lies before him is overwhelming, and he knows that one by one, everyone will abandon him until he is all alone.

But the amazing thing is that we still have a chance. We still have a choice. We can stop everything right now and decide that we will be loyal to Jesus to the best of our ability, every day of this week that changed the world.

It may be through coming to worship. It may be through extra time in prayer and meditation every day of Holy Week. It may be through serving others who are in need, or reading the entirety of one of the gospels, or finishing our Lenten intention with special dedication and love. It doesn't matter what we do to follow Jesus to the Cross. It just matters that we do something.

“I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind.” Our task this week is to prove that bit of scripture false, to make it wrong.

We can't do it alone. We need each other. It will be difficult. Living Holy Week fully, with integrity, demands that we sacrifice our emotional status quo and risk our carefully cultivated composure. We have to trust Jesus and follow him into the shadows, for the sake of the promise of the light. If we say yes to the invitation of Palm Sunday, we are committing to being trapped somewhere between the wrenching fear and despair of losing faith, and the ultimate promise that the resurrected Christ will shine forth over the world with love that heals and reconciles all people. We say yes to being stuck between those two poles for seven long days.

“I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind.” Let's try to prove that bit of scripture false, remembering Jesus and staying with him from now until Easter Day.

Then he will prove the rest of it false, because he is not a dead man at all. And that's all we need to know to get through these days of despair as we wait for the light—he is alive.

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice (she/her/hers) is an Episcopal priest who serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has taught undergraduate courses at the University of Indianapolis and has contributed to *Lectionary Homiletics*, the *Young Clergy Women's Project* journal *Fidelia's Sisters*, and other publications. She has served as a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and is currently a member of The Episcopal Church's Evangelism Council of Advice. A communicator of the gospel at heart, she writes and teaches on a wide variety of topics, including rethinking evangelism, stewardship, leadership, women's theology of the body, mysticism, and spiritual development. When she's not thinking about theology, particularly the intersection of evangelism and justice work (which is all the time, seriously), you'll find her swing dancing. Find more of her work at her website [Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers \(www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com\)](http://www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).