

## Palm Sunday

For we modern folks, Christmas is the centerpiece of our year as Christians.

And why not?

A cooing baby, the soft straw of the manger; the thrill of new parents; the exotic visit of wise men from the East.

And let's not forget presents and family get togethers and Christmas trees too!

But for the early Church, say, the first several hundred years, Christmas was a very minor part of the year.

It is this week, beginning with *Palm* Sunday, which, ever so quickly, transforms into *Passion* Sunday, with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to follow; this week was, and still is, the very heart of the Christian year.

And here is why.

In the beginning, God created a good earth and gave it to us. "Depend on me," God said, "and you will be well."

But instead, we trusted in our own best thinking, and competed with God in determining what is good and what is evil.

That's what the famous tree in the garden was all about: who gets to decide what is good and what is evil?

God told us it was God's decision.

We disagreed.

But God wasn't finished with us yet.

He called Abram and Sarah to leave behind everything they knew, and promised that even in their old age they would have a child, whose progeny would fill the earth.

Abram and Sarah believed, they went where they were told to go, and they were given a son, named Isaac, which in English means "laughter."

The boy whose name is Laughter is God's promise to us that if we follow the way God sets before us, we too will laugh.

God still wasn't finished with us.

When Abraham's descendants became slaves in Egypt, God rescued them.

He gave them a plan for a society that rests on equality between people; the sharing of property, both land and goods; forgiving debts and showing kindness to the weak, the orphan, the foreigner.

This society was to have but one King, God alone. In it, people didn't steal, envy, lie or disrespect each other.

It was a society where all were free to laugh.

The Israelites couldn't accept that plan.

They wanted a king other than God.

And when they got those kings, they learned that kings will do what kings will do: they make laws different than God's; they accumulate wealth, create classes between the people, kick out foreigners, collect rather than forgive debts, and they raise armies.

Total trust in God was replaced by total trust in human institutions; in gods made from human hands.

The prophet Isaiah, who we heard from today, was a palace prophet. He was a prophet to the king when Israel was about to be invaded by its neighbor.

Isaiah, speaking God's words, tells the king not to form military alliances with other countries, not to use his own best thinking, but, rather, to trust that God will protect the people, even in the face of invasion.

The king of course rejects Isaiah's prophecy as totally absurd. Everyone knows we must take matters of self-defense into our own hands!

He forms his alliances, doing things his way, and the people of Israel are invaded, crushed, and sent into exile.

But God wasn't finished with us yet.

You see, our biggest problem of faith, and it goes all the way back to Adam, to Eve, is that we don't believe that God will actually do what he says.

We don't believe that God will care for us, protect us, be with us, rescue us.

If we don't raise armies, if we don't protect ourselves financially, militarily and every which way, if we don't decide what is good, and what is evil, of course we will die.

That is the central human fear.

To trust completely in God is a pipedream. Or worse. We say.

To trust completely in God is utterly naive. We say.

To trust completely in God is patent nonsense. We say.

And then God sends Jesus.

Jesus who laughed.

Jesus who did exactly what Adam and Moses and the Israelites and you and I so fear doing.

Jesus trusts God in everything.

In a world in which family ties mean everything, he leaves his family, making family out of those who follow him.

He befriends the nobodies and the dirty, making everybody a somebody, making everyone clean.

He chides his disciples not to worry about food or clothes or shelter, assuring them that God will provide.

He instructs us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile.

He confronts the rule keepers with God's will, pointing out again and again that rules for rules sake are *our* best thinking, not God's.

And all of that, it seems, gets him to where he is today. Abandoned, betrayed, falsely accused, tortured, sentenced to execution on a monstrous device.

The horrible consequences of doing God's will are all crashing down on him today.

All of our worst nightmares about what will happen, if we really follow God, come true in this one man, in this one moment in history.

If you haven't shuddered yet, you may want to now.

While the journey begins with Christmas, it is Holy Week that takes us to the very heart of God, and therefore to the true nature of all Reality.

Hanging from the cross, as the veil of the Temple is torn in two, the mystery of life is revealed to us all.

Love and suffering, suffering and love, are the gateways to the heart of God. Without suffering, you and I will never learn mercy or compassion. Without love, we will never learn how to be free.

At the intersection of suffering and love is eternity.

The Kingdom of God is not somewhere out there, nor is it a door to be opened for us only when we die.

It is here, now, inviting us to sit in its presence today.

Suffering and love, steadfastly embraced, cracks open the hard shells of your ego and mine; and in that cracking open, transforms us into something completely new, something completely unexpected.

It is resurrection.

But we don't get to resurrection without walking up Calvary's hillside.

We don't get to resurrection without the crucifixion of our small self, our controlling self, our "me-first" self.

We don't get to resurrection unless we follow Jesus.

This is some of the mystery of Holy Week.

It invites us to walk where we have always feared to walk: on the road of complete trust in God.

On the road of surrender to God.

On the road where we lay down our need to fix, to manage, to control.

So come, this Maundy Thursday, and see for yourself what happens when your feet are washed. Come on Friday as we recall the Stations of the Cross our Lord endured.

Come as we strip the altar, extinguish the candles, remove the Holy Eucharist.

If you walk this journey, perhaps, come Easter morning, you will see something you have never seen before.

And in that seeing, perhaps you too will laugh.

+amen