

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Passion (Palm) Sunday • April 5, 2020**

**Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 31:9-16 • Philippians 2:5-11 • Matthew 26:14-27:66**

On Palm Sunday, we hear two different stories. On the one hand, we hear the story of Jesus's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. And on the other hand, we hear the story of Jesus's passion. A discerning listener, someone like you, would probably hear those two stories and think, *Well, which one is it? Is it the procession? Or is it the passion? Which one is true?* Palm/Passion Sunday asks us to hold two stories in our view at the same time and, instead of picking one story or the other, hold them side by side. Looking for what emerges when we read them through one another.

There is a lot going on in these two stories, so let's pick just one thing to focus on: the disciples. And by "disciples," I mean the group of twelve men who followed Jesus. Simon, Andrew, James, John, etc. (You'll see why that definition is important in a minute.)

For the disciples, the procession into Jerusalem was the climax of Jesus's ministry. Jesus was being hailed as a messiah, a savior, and these disciples from nowhere important are now in the middle of the action. They have chosen to follow Jesus, and now it appears that they have made the right choice. Anyone who shows up now is just hopping on the bandwagon. They were the ones who were there first.

What's going on in the story is celebration. Shouts of hosanna and cheering crowds. But what's going on in the disciples' heads? It's a sense of certainty. A feeling of knowledge, maybe even pride. We were right. We are important. We are going to get some of Jesus's power.

You can find traces of that certainty throughout Matthew's gospel, but now it's much more evident. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, the disciples argue over who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The disciples seem self-assured in their estimation of their own worthiness and merits. They know themselves, they know their skills, they know their abilities. They know what they would do in a hard situation.

And the same thing happens in Jerusalem. When Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times, Peter responds, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." When Jesus tells Judas that one of the disciples will betray him, Judas replies, "Surely not I." When the disciples first followed Jesus, they believed that he knew things they didn't. That they had to trust. But now they seem to be thinking that they know just as much as Jesus. When Jesus tells them who they are, they say, "I know myself better than you do."

And yet, where are the disciples during Jesus' passion? Nowhere. They are gone. Their certainty about themselves has been shown to be hollow. They were confident that they could be the best disciples, that they had the truest faith, that they would be the best. But as soon as things take a turn, as soon as things become complicated, as soon as they are the ones who have to be held to account, things begin to fall apart. Their judgement opens them up to being judged. The moment the disciples falter is when they make a claim about their own superiority.

In fact, Matthew says that the people who remained with Jesus during his crucifixion were the women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. You could read something about gender into this. But the more important thing to notice is that the people who remain with Jesus until the end, who follow Jesus all the way to the cross, are people who have made no claims about their own superiority. The most important disciples turn out to be the ones who have gone unnoticed until now. The most faithful disciples are the ones who never rest on their own certainty, who are never fully certain what kinds of people they are.

People who are certain of their moral and spiritual character often find that certainty misplaced when they enter a difficult situation. When Peter is in a comfortable situation, he says he

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would never deny Jesus. But when he's in a difficult situation, he does it immediately. If you think you are a good judge of your own and other people's character, Matthew suggests, you better get ready to be disappointed. Human judgement is fallible. And what we see in the shadow of the cross is that our old ways of judging ourselves and others break down under the weight of the real world. When you start judging, you open yourself up to judgement.

And we certainly spend most of our lives running through that circle of judging and being judged. We judge others based on what we perceive to be the content of their character or their possibilities in life. And when we judge people as having no value, it's possible to run roughshod over them. Our economic life takes it for granted that there are people who don't deserve basic protections. Our political culture assumes that you don't win by getting more votes, you win by humiliating your opponent. Our social life posits that there are some people who are not worthy of redemption. These cycles of judging put us under a constant state of threat and drive us to see one another with contempt. They talk us into thinking that other people are worthless. It's not a coincidence that the way Jesus was killed, crucifixion, was a method used on people who were deemed worthless by society.

When you read the story of Jesus's trial and passion, those cycles of judgement are what you see. Jesus isn't killed by one particularly sadistic or callous person. He's killed by a whole series of people who overestimate their own ability to be fair judges. It's as if their certainty keeps them from seeing the thing that's right in front of them.

And what's remarkable about this story, what makes it redemptive, is that Jesus, the victim who is viewed with contempt, does not repeat the same cycle again and again. Jesus is not beholden to the same impulses, the same fears, the same needs that estrange us from one another. This is what St. Paul alludes to when he speaks about Jesus pouring himself out for us. He means Jesus transcending our death-producing spirals of judgment and creating something new. Which means, ironically enough, that Jesus's power is revealed in weakness. What looks like failure to the disciples, to the elites, to the Romans, to the powerful, turns out to be success. Not because Jesus gets revenge. But because Jesus shows how vapid the whole system is.

We humans are poor judges. We condemn the innocent. We excuse the guilty. We look past the inconvenient truths and make up lies to console our consciences. In that way, Matthew's story of the procession and passion is the story of people who become unrecognizable to themselves.

But in this same story, we discover that we can't change God. Even on the cross, God is still recognizable. God is still visible. The hymn we are about to sing puts it this way. "Holy God, holy and living one, life that never ends, you show your love by dying, dying for your friends, and we behold you living."

Which is about as good as you could put it. Even in death, God is living. Because even in death, God is still God. Still loving. Still creating. Still free.

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