A Homily by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Palm Sunday ~ March 24, 2024

Soon after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, events take a decidedly grim turn. In a moment we will hear the passion of our Lord. As we do so, let’s not only listen with our ears and minds; let’s enter in, upon the stage, and engage the text with the imagination of our hearts. Let us do so from several vantage points:

First, from the perspective of “the authorities” – the religious authorities, chief priests of the Temple; and the political authorities, the governor and his representatives from Rome. Authorities bear the mantle of responsibility. Their job is to maintain order. Their primary allegiance may be to YHWH, the God of Israel, or to Caesar, the God of Rome, but in practice their allegiance is to the law – religious laws, political laws – to abide by and uphold proper adherence to the teachings and traditions.

If your objective is to keep the peace, you will not be glad to have a new teacher, a challenger, in your midst. You will not welcome one who threatens to undermine your authority, expose your hypocrisy. Not only must you get rid of the problem, you must do so in a way to retain the support of the people; you have to come out of this looking good, with clean hands. So you jockey about. Just like the political and religious authorities of today or any day, you take the temperature of the people, keep an eye on the polls. You want to win points for those things deemed popular, and make sure the blame – if there is blame – falls on someone else. Employ pawns to do the dirty work, to take the fall when necessary. Spin the story, deny complicity. Whatever else, control the trouble(maker) – even if he speaks truth, especially if he ***is*** truth.

We might gaze next upon the crowds. Perhaps we’re among them. The crowds that welcomed Jesus in, singing “Hosanna,” and will now turn against him spitting “Crucify him” at fever pitch. Crowds are like that: fickle. Powerful, too. As a river that surges and swells, leaps the banks, sweeps open new paths; a real force with which to reckon. Crowds do not have much acuity or clarity of purpose. They can as easily crush you as lift you up. Since they are comprised only of masses in a moving current, they flow toward the path of least resistance. Since there is no locus for deliberate thought or reflection, they can be easily manipulated, redirected. Crowds are humanity at its worst: a headless humanity. In their surging and in their wake, we witness a terrible dumb inevitability.

Within the crowd, even before the crowd gathers, early in the morning in the garden, or waiting outside the court, we turn our gaze upon the disciples. Perhaps we’re not among the crowds; perhaps we’re with the disciples, one of Jesus’ people. Who could not stay awake. Could not stay present, or endure the pain. Who fell far short of their own true intentions. Who did not stay true to their own love for Jesus. That’s what’s happening for the disciples. We do that – or I’ll own it for myself; I do that: I am all in, I am committed, baptized, faithful… and I betray my own deepest desires, by what I do or do not do. I betray myself, those I love, I betray Christ.

Among these characters – even those with names – Judas, Peter, Pilate – nobody really owns up to being there, being part of this. Most claim to be a victim of circumstance, reluctant, as if there by accident. The temple priests tell the Roman rulers, “it’s on you.” Pilate passes the buck to Herod before washing his hands. My guess – those in the crowd went home at the end of the day, said, “Yeah, I was there; it was pretty intense, but I was in the back; it wasn’t what I thought, wasn’t what I had in mind.” And the disciples… nowhere to be found.

So we turn our gaze upon Jesus. Jesus is clear, present, awake in every moment. Jesus steps forward, steady with intention, with heart; “it is for this hour that I have come.” All that he does, Jesus does for us in a willing embrace. His life is not taken from him; Jesus offers himself, willingly. Jesus stands: God’s love unmasking the hierarchies. He gathers his friends for supper with one last farewell, goes out to the garden to say his prayers, faces his persecutors. He does not simply stop breathing; rather, he commends, gives over, his spirit to God.

Jesus puts himself in our hands; offers himself: “Here am I.” … For us to do with him what we will: follow him…, love him…, betray him…, fear him. Fear and betray him even as we love him. Here am I. I am love. I am with you.

Perhaps no one else was quite there, but Jesus is there. Jesus is not fickle, nor manipulative, does not sleep through even a moment. Jesus is steady, present. He has his moments of weakness, sorrow, regret. ***And*** he stays on course… all the way to the end. “Jesus becomes what we all fear and all deny: nakedness, exposure, vulnerability and failure.” (Rohr). In his so doing, we now see – in his flesh, in his blood, in his sweat, his tears – we now see that his love – the love of God – is not deterred or diminished or conditional, ever. Not ever. Not even by our violence. The love of God for this whole gathered crowd of humanity is everlasting. “Father, forgive them; they know not what they are doing.”

Here am I. I am with you. I am here for you. Even to the ends of the earth and the end of the ages. Amen.