

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALM SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY: THE BEGINNING OR THE END?”
April 17, 2011
Matthew 21:1-11
ALL SERVICES

On Palm Sunday April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant, General of the Union Army, at the village of Appomattox Court House, Virginia. This surrender ended the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil. State against state, brother against brother; it was a conflict that literally tore our nation apart.

Five days later--Good Friday, April 14, 1865--America's most revered president, Abraham Lincoln, was shot and mortally wounded by John Wilkes Booth in Ford's Theatre.

It was Lincoln who wrote the Emancipation Proclamation that ended slavery in the U.S. forever. It was Lincoln who wrote and gave The Gettysburg Address. Lincoln hated war, but he was drawn into this one because he believed it was the only way to save the nation. On Palm Sunday the war ended. Triumph. On Good Friday, Abraham Lincoln became the first U.S. president to be assassinated. Tragedy.

This Sunday begins Holy Week. Today is the beginning of the triumph and the tragedy of the six days preceding Easter. That's the kind of world we live in--the triumphant end to a terrible war on Sunday, and the tragic slaying of the great leader who brought us through that war on Friday. One moment we are on top of the world, believing that nothing can go wrong. And then suddenly, literally, all hell breaks loose. That, as they say, is life.

Life is like that. Celebration and sadness; triumph and tragedy.

I remember the days, not very long ago, when we said that the best investment one can make is owning ones' own home. Remember when banks were begging people to take out home loans, because property values seemed destined to rise forever? Remember how you could look at the equity in your home and feel rich? How foolish we were to forget the lesson of the stock market scarcely a decade ago. In a free market bubbles have a tendency to burst. All it takes is one little pin prick. It's happened over and over through history, but we have short memories. It's easy to forget that the stock market crash of 2000-2002 caused the loss of \$5 trillion in the market value of companies. It can happen so quickly.

The triumph and the tragedy: Palm Sunday: Good Friday - Life happens.

The amazing thing is that it happened to the Son of God. Acclaimed a King on Sunday and crucified on Friday--it's incredible. Didn't they realize who he was? Sure, he gave up his divinity when he entered the world as a tiny baby, but couldn't they see his miracles? Didn't he raise Lazarus from the dead? Couldn't they sense he was no ordinary man? He was the Messiah, the Savior, and our Redeemer, sent into the world by the Father to save the world from its sins. How could they miss it? How could they not know?

Maybe it was because he came riding into town on a donkey. How's that for lowering expectations? Kings ride on magnificent horses, not lowly donkeys. They ride in limos, not in Yugos. Would we vote for a President who rode around in a rusted out 1970 Ford? In our world, image is everything.

But the King of Kings? He entered riding on a lowly donkey. If he had consulted his political advisors, they would have been aghast. What was he up to? Leaders are supposed to project strength and power. Ronald Reagan, not Jimmy Carter.

Jesus wasn't listening to his political advisors when he made his entrance into Jerusalem that day. Instead, he was listening to the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah envisioned the King of Kings, the Messiah, coming not on a great stallion, but riding on a humble donkey.

This is why holy week moves from triumph to tragedy. The expectations of the people had been dashed. They had voted for change, but change was nowhere in view. Besides, who can live with *“peace to the nations”*? That’s what the prophet said. Bring the troops home? Not when you have enemies who want to destroy you. Even Jesus’ disciples expected him to exercise his kingship by vanquishing their enemies. The two disciples on the Emmaus road tell the resurrected Jesus, who walks along with them, yet whom they do not recognize, that they had hoped that this Jesus was the one to redeem Israel (Luke 24:21).

When Jesus appears to his disciples before his ascension, the disciples are still asking, *“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6). They wanted Jesus to establish an earthly kingdom and to make them his lieutenants. What a disappointment! They wanted Churchill and they got Gandhi. And so some of the crowd turned away from him and much of the crowd turned against him. It should not be surprising that some of those who sang their sweet hosannas on Palm Sunday were shouting *“Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!”* on Good Friday. Triumph and tragedy. Between Palm Sunday and Good Friday the crowds turned their backs on the Son of God.

But here is the question; would it be any different today? Would we welcome Christ into our community, into our family, even into our church? It is an unsettling question, but it needs to be asked.

Palm Sunday forces us to confront our own darkness as an act of repentance. Can we confront our own darkness? Can we confront our need for repentance? Would we welcome Christ into our world? Inviting Christ into our lives can be very disturbing and unsettling. Just think of the things we value. Status. Power. Money. Image. How does it all square with this humble figure riding on a donkey? Not very well, does it? Look at our popular heroes. I’m thinking about the action-type movies preferred by most males. How do the heroes of these movies spend their time? Blowing things up. Avenging past wrongs. Asserting their dominance over their foes. “I will return!” Again, reconcile these images with that humble figure riding on a donkey.

Do we really understand what it means when we say that Jesus is Lord? It means that we need to examine our lives, examine our goals, examine what it is

that we are living for and ask ourselves is it enough? Is this really the meaning of life? Or is there more? Is there an eternal dimension of life that calls us toward the heroic? Holy week is a time for increased reflection and subsequent repentance as we measure our lives by our Lord's life and death.

The triumph tragedy: Palm Sunday: Good Friday - Life happens. The amazing thing is that it happened to the Son of God. Would it be any different if he came today? Of course not.

In 1957, Carlotta Walls Lanier along with 8 other students attempted to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. There are photographs of very angry white faces surrounding the nine black students; photographs that are grotesque and disturbing.

What makes it so disturbing is that these are the photographs of the gathering of very ordinary people who came to watch what they hoped would be the atrocities of the lives of 9 black students. There was anger there. There was fear there. The mob made it clear that they were there for a reason. You can see it in the faces of the mob. But the most troublesome thing about this group was that there were very likely those who considered themselves Christians.

Today we are repulsed by such thoughts. What I want to remind you is that these are not events that occurred in Rome 2,000 years ago. These are images from America, less than 100 years ago. The same dark heart that beat in the hearts of our ancestors beats within us. As much as we would like to think differently, human nature has not changed in these past 50 plus years. That is why any appeal to discrimination, prejudice, hatred--whether against people of another race or another religion, or whatever that prejudice might be--cannot be tolerated, not by people whose Lord was hung on a tree while mocking soldiers below gambled for his garments.

Palm Sunday: Good Friday: - Life happens. It happened to the Son of God. It still happens in our world today.

But here is what we must see: while the cross of Christ reveals the evil humanity is capable of, it also reveals the love of which God is capable.

Ultimately the story of Holy Week is one of triumph and tragedy, then triumph once again, not only because of Easter Sunday, but because of Christ's victory over sin and death on Calvary. This is why the cross is so precious to believers. It calls us to repentance, but it also represents God's grace which covers all our sins, even our most grievous sins.

This is our centennial year! This is a church with a story of both triumph and tragedy. Dr. Babbs triumphantly integrated our church and tragically lost thousands of members. But our story gives new meaning to that line in the old Gospel song, **"I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown."**

The triumph and the tragedy. They cheered Jesus on Sunday and on Friday they hung him on a tree. But God had the last word. God took that tree and made it a symbol of our salvation from the forces of sin and death. Triumph and tragedy, then triumph once again. Thank God for that final triumph--the triumph over sin and death.

I invite you into a church that shares that victory. On this Palm Sunday, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your triumphant church.