

Mark 15:29-32

It used to be that Palm Sunday was an oasis in the middle of the desert. For five-and-a-half weeks Christians travel through Lent watching our Lord suffer, and sweat, and cry tears of agony. The journey through Lent is a slow, difficult trek across a painful desert. And that journey is not over. Before we leave the desert on Easter Sunday, we must travel through Holy Week. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday still await us. The agony of our Lord intensifies as we come to this painful stretch of desert.

But Palm Sunday always stood out like an oasis for Christians. We put the solemn Lenten hymns away for a day and sing brighter melodies with their hosannas. We turn our eyes away from our Lord's agony and rejoice with the crowd of people as He enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey. We cut down palm branches from the trees within our oasis and lay them down ahead of Jesus. Our mood is more festive than it has been for the past five-and-a-half weeks. We're at the Palm Sunday oasis.

At least, it used to be that way. But now in recent years, the Gospel reading for today has been changed. No longer the Palm Sunday procession, it's now the Passion Story, this year according to St. Mark. The heading over our Introit may say, "Palm Sunday," but next to that it says, "Sunday of the Passion." In some churches two entire chapters of St. Mark are read from the lectern. That's 119 verses! The Gospel reading may be longer than the entire sermon! And those verses, as we heard them earlier, are not an oasis from the sufferings of our Lord. They place Him not on a donkey, but on a cross. He is showered not with hosannas, but with jeers and taunting. We may be at our Palm Sunday oasis today, but the water we drink here is the bitter water of Jesus' sufferings and death—the same water we've been drinking throughout Lent. But don't turn away from it, for it is the water of life. Jesus rode into those waters for you. He drank those bitter waters for you. He did not turn away from those who arrested Him even though He is King of kings and Lord of lords. He did not struggle as the soldiers beat Him and hit Him with rods.

It's amazing to note that among all who have called themselves kings and rulers on this earth, Jesus stands alone; not just because of what they did to Him, but because of the fact that He allowed it. He never once objected. He never once defended Himself. He never became angry at those who were abusing Him with their fists and their words. Do you think they were surprised? The Chief Priests, and the Elders of the people, and even the Roman soldiers—do you think they were surprised that Jesus offered no resistance...that no words of anger came from His mouth? These soldiers had beaten and crucified many criminals, but never one like this. The Romans had overthrown numerous kings, but they had never come across a king like Jesus; a king who refuses to defend Himself; a king who accepts their mockery; a king who humbly, and even joyfully, bears the cross they place upon Him.

Part of the ritual of crucifixion was the jeering...the words that made fun of the one being crucified. Crucifixion was never done in silence. The laughing, the mocking was part of the painful experience. For Jesus this was especially true. They didn't just mock Him; they mocked Him because of who He claimed to be. The purple robe, the crown of thorns, the charge against Him which read: "This is Jesus the king of the Jews," was all done to make fun of Him. "Ha!" they laughed, "You who were going to rebuild the temple in three days...if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" "He saved others," they

jeered,” but He cannot save Himself...let this king of Israel come down from the cross and we’ll believe in Him.”

What does a man do when others say, “I’ll bet you can’t lift that barbell over your head”... and he knows that he can? He’ll do it, won’t he? He’ll lift it up over his head to stop their taunting; to prove them wrong; to shut them up. They taunted Jesus with the words, “Come down from the cross and we’ll believe in you!” Well, here was His chance—not just to shut them up—to astound them with a miracle so that they would believe! Why didn’t He do it? Why didn’t He come down from the cross?

What would Jesus have proved if He had done this miracle and come down from the cross? That He was God? No...but coming back to life after He was dead—that would do it. Those taunting Him said, “If you do this miracle, we’ll believe in you.” But what greater miracle is there than rising from the dead? And yet, after His resurrection they refused to believe. We think that faith comes by being amazed at the mighty things of God. We want God to impress us; show us what He can do. Heal my disease. Solve our money problem. Pack our pews with people. But faith does not come by what we see. It comes by what we hear...by hearing the word of the cross. Through that word God promises to work faith when and where He pleases. So coming down from the cross would bring no one to faith; but staying up on the cross—that’s the stuff that faith is made of.

We don’t believe in a god who comes down off the cross; we believe in a God who stays up there for us. We don’t believe in a god who avoids suffering; we believe in a God who suffers for us. We don’t believe in a god who runs away from death; we believe in a God who dies for us. We don’t believe in a god who abandons his creation in order to save his own skin; we believe in a God who endures our punishment to the bitter end.

If Jesus had come down from the cross, that would have proved that He was not God; for God could never run away from the cross. He could never go back on His word and break His promise to bear the sin of the world. If Jesus had come down from the cross, then I would not believe in Him, nor would you. For God came to save sinners. He came to serve. He came to die our death. He came to give His life as a ransom for us.

“Come down from the cross and we’ll believe in you,” they taunted. How foolish. And yet, how very much like us; because that’s what we would have done. We don’t like it when others hurt us. We try to avoid pain and suffering. If we were on a cross, our only thought would be the desire to get down from it. The Passion Story of our Lord shows us how very different God is from us. “He saved others; He cannot save Himself!” They were right! He could not...He would not. We wouldn’t think twice. We would save ourselves if we could. Jesus refused to come down from the cross. He was a king who put the needs of His people ahead of His own needs. He is the King of Grace.

Because He stayed up on that cross, you are forgiven. Because Jesus stayed up on the cross, you have the Father’s love. Because He stayed up on the cross, God gives you the benefits of the cross in your baptism and here in the Lord’s Supper. Because Jesus stayed up on the cross, eternal life is yours in His name. Jesus, my friend, refused...He absolutely refused to come down from the cross because of you. You are the reason He took the jeering and taunting. You are the reason He accepted the beating and the crown of thorns. Because of you He allowed them to drive nails into His flesh. You are the reason He stayed

up there and took every bit of punishment that His Father had to give. His love for you; His mercy toward you is the reason. “Come down from the cross,” they laughed...but there was no way that He would. It was to save you from sin, death, and hell that He went to the cross; and that’s why, therefore, He stayed up on the cross to the bitter end.

What kind of king would allow himself to be stripped, mocked, beaten, and crucified? Your King. He who endured everything for you so that you can live forever in His Kingdom of heaven. That’s the oasis we’re traveling to. The oasis that has only the sweetest water and the greenest trees; no suffering, no tears, no sin, no death—that’s the oasis Jesus prepared for you because He was willing to endure the bloody cross.

And so come this week to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday...come to this painful stretch of desert in Lent...come and see your Lord suffer and die for you. And come next Sunday to Easter’s celebration...come and see your Lord rise in triumph for you. It’s all part of the journey, your journey, as your Lord Jesus leads you to the permanent oasis above with Him. Amen.