

Sermon: Stand by Jesus
Palm Sunday, Year B
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In just thirty minutes we have witnessed a disturbing reversal. We came in raising our palm fronds, shouting “Hosannah”, rejoicing at Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. And then things just spiraled downward. His enemies gained control, the religious leaders sought to kill him, the Roman authorities condemned him; his disciple Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, “All of Jesus’ *followers* deserted him and fled.” (With friends like that who needs enemies?) The crowd shouted “Crucify him!” and the Roman soldiers nailed the Son of God to a cross. *NO one stood by Jesus. No one.*

Can we see ourselves in this story? Who would want to? Aren’t we sometimes fickle in our faith? If we are honest with ourselves, doesn’t our devotion to God ebb and flow? Do we sometimes find ourselves faithful to God when the going is easy enough, able to praise and thank God when life seems good? But like the people in today’s story, don’t we also desert, or betray or deny God’s very existence when we fail to love, when we ignore justice, when we withhold forgiveness?

The strange truth is that our God is a *crucified* God, a God who is vulnerable and defenseless. Jesus endured torture, suffering and death and was subjected to the worst that humanity could throw at him. Yet, he carried no weapon to defend himself. He did not retaliate for the violence he experienced. God has the freedom to transcend what makes sense to us. There is no tit for tat, no equal exchange. No eye for an eye. No violence for violence. The cross reminds us that no matter what form of hatred or evil humanity dishes out, whatever pathetic or fickle behavior we find ourselves complicit in, God’s love won’t be withdrawn from us.

The cross reminds us that God identifies with the powerless. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes, “if we imitate the non-violent, non-retaliatory response of Jesus, *we ourselves become a sign of the same divine love.*”ⁱ (Repeat) As followers of Jesus this is what we sign on to. While violence, whether it comes through words, or through guns or through being nailed to a cross, seems to be all powerful, we learn through Jesus’ life and death, that real power is the power of a vulnerable love. The cross shows us there is nothing between God’s love and us because his love permeates the entire created order, goes out to and through those who have faith and those who don’t, those who love and those who hate, those who are violent and those who are heartbroken by the violence. God’s love is strangely (and maybe maddeningly) inclusive and absolute.

The cross, once a symbol of failure, humiliation and disgrace, has been turned inside out and has become a symbol of a mysterious divine love that offers us a life-giving way forward. Jesus’ death indeed gives us the divine freedom to love.

While today, Palm Sunday, we may ponder our vulnerability and susceptibility to violence, and our own ability to say the words, “Crucify him!”, there is more to the story that has yet to

unfold. Holy Week has just begun. Let's ponder its depths together. Death will not be the final word. *Can we stand by Jesus?*

Amen.

ⁱ Rowan Williams, *The Sign and the Sacrifice*, p.10