In His Hands
Psalm 31:9-16

9 … “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Matthew 21:9 (NIV2011)

These are the words we are accustomed to hearing on Palm Sunday morning. As we hear the Scriptures read, Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem stirs our souls with joy. But deep down inside, we know that Palm Sunday isn’t really about joy, it’s the beginning of the slow, painful walk to the cross. As we ride down the hill into Jerusalem with Jesus, we glimpse him as he mourns over the city. Once in the city, an angry Jesus will enter the Temple and clear out all the money changers and merchants. The religious leaders will seek his life and one of his own disciples will be more than willing to sell him out for 30 pieces of silver.

And despite his repeated warnings of what the week would hold, even those around him didn’t know what was coming on their last night together. Throughout all of Holy Week Jesus was well aware that his life was not his own. His life was in the hands of the Father that he had served so faithfully from his birth.

In the front page article of the April church newsletter, Pastor Clay talks about how we can’t get to the resurrection without the cross. And we don’t get to the cross without the trials of Holy Week, which begins with Palm Sunday. How is it that the most joyous event in Christian history is preceded by so much pain and suffering? Not only that it is preceded by pain and suffering, but that Jesus knew, HE KNEW, what was going to happen, yet he didn’t shirk the task before him.
As I reflect on Jesus’ journey from Palm Sunday to Easter morning, I picture him using Psalm 31 as a mantra to help him carry out the task that God had set before him. Not only that, but I found myself looking at these verses with the eyes of someone living in the midst of a global pandemic that has turned life topsy-turvy, like the tables of the money changers, with no end in sight.

The selected verses from Psalm 31 are a lament. If Jesus ever felt the need to lament, it no doubt would have been as he made his way down the Mount of Olives knowing he would end the week on a cross atop the hill called Golgotha. In verses 9 and 10 we hear the psalmist crying out, asking for the Lord’s mercy. The psalmist is crushed by the weight of his affliction, his soul and body wracked by sorrow. I can see this as Jesus’ lament as he begins to feel the full weight of what God is asking him to do in taking on our sin as his own. Today, in light of the pandemic that has changed life around the globe, I can hear a multitude of voices crying out in the same way. Isolated from family and friends, unable to properly mourn the dead, fearful of what this continuing health crises means for them personally and for the world as a whole. There is a whole lot of lamenting going on!

The cry for mercy in the face of the trouble we find ourselves dealing with covers so many parts of our lives. We cry for mercy socially, as we are isolated from one another. Even with technology allowing us to see one another, it is still not the same as giving a hug or clasping a hand. We cry for mercy emotionally, because this isolation brings a pall of depression even to those of us who don’t struggle with mental illness. We cry for those who will lose their fight with mental illness as a result of the isolation we now must observe. We cry for mercy economically,
as we watch the stock market tumble, our friends and families out of work, and the world economy in danger.

Jesus grieves over Jerusalem because he knows its fate. We find ourselves grieving now because we don’t know our fate. With uncertainty on so many sides, we find ourselves grieving what is now lost and grieving what the future might bring. As we watch and read the constant news coverage of this pandemic, we can find ourselves consumed with grief.

The psalmist goes on in verse 11 to say that he feels the contempt of his enemies and has become a dread to even those closest to him. Jesus already knew who his enemies were. The religious leaders made no bones about their dislike of the itinerant rabbi. He had also experienced having his own followers drop away when he spoke hard truths to them. People began moving away from him for fear of what being in his circle might mean for them and the persecution they could experience if they remained.

Today we are afraid of our neighbors and even our own family members. Have they been exposed to the virus? Can I get sick if I was with them anytime recently? If I hear someone cough in the supermarket, am I going to assume that they will infect all of the other shoppers? If my grandchild is running a fever, do I shun them for fear they may be the agent of my death? Social distancing is meant to keep us safe, but as we move away from others, it can cause us to begin to distrust everyone.

The psalmist continues his lament, saying he feels forgotten as if he were a dead person. Jesus knew that He would die, but also that His own death would be
temporary. For those today who are isolated, having had little contact with the outside world already, these days can feel like death. Several of the residents at Living Branches have said to me they are glad they are living there even though they must keep distance. If they were still in their homes in the community, they would be bereft of any social interactions. We know that many people will lose their lives to this disease, however, we also know there is hope in the risen Christ for all who open their hearts to him.

“They conspire against me and plot to take my life.” While Jesus didn’t use these exact words, the meaning is the same as when he explained to the disciples that he would be turned over to the religious leaders to be crucified. Terror existed on every side; the religious leaders wanted him gone. His own disciple, Judas, betrayed him for blood money. We are living in terror today of an invisible enemy. How do we combat the terror of the invisible? With faith and hope in the resurrection.

The psalmist comes to this same conclusion as he closes with these words, taken from The Message:

Psalm 31:14-16 (MSG)
14 Desperate, I throw myself on you: you are my God!
15 Hour by hour I place my days in your hand, safe from the hands out to get me.
16 Warm me, your servant, with a smile; save me because you love me.

Jesus understood that his times were in the hands of the Father. He was able to bear the crushing weight of death knowing that His Father loved him. We, too, have the
same comfort knowing that our times are in the hands of a loving God, a God who has promised good to us, who will never leave or forsake us. In these uncertain times, I encourage you to rest in those strong hands.

Jesus knew that death would overtake him. We know that eventually death will overtake us, too. But we have this promise made to us in Jesus’ resurrection, that earthly death is not the end, it is just the beginning of an eternity in the presence of the Living God, the God who loves us.

I close this morning, with these words written by Arthur Bennett, in *The Valley of Vision*. It is titled, “God the Source of All Good”

O Lord God, Who inhabitest eternity,
The heavens declare they glory,
The earth thy riches,
The universe is they temple.
Thy presence fills immensity,
Yet thou hast of thy pleasure created life, and communicated happiness,
Thou hast made me what I am,
And given me what I have.
In thee I live and move and have my being.
Thy providence has set the bounds of my habitation, and wisely administers all my affairs.
I thank thee for thy riches to me in Jesus,
For the unclouded revelation of him in thy Word, where I behold his person, character, grace, glory, humiliation, sufferings, death and resurrection.
Give me to feel a need of His continual saviourhood,
and cry with Job, “I am vile,”
with Peter, ‘I perish, ’
with the publican, ‘Be merciful to me, a sinner.’
Subdue in me the love of sin,
Let me know the need of renovation as well as of forgiveness in order to
serve and enjoy thee forever.
I come to thee in the all-prevailing name of Jesus, with nothing of my own
to plead, no works, no worthiness, no promises.
I am often straying, often knowingly opposing they authority, often abusing
thy goodness.
Much of my guilt arises from my religious privileges, my low estimation of
them, my failure to use them to my advantage,
But I am not careless of thy favor regardless of thy glory.
Impress me deeply with a sense of thine omnipresence, that thou art about
my path, my ways, my lying down, my end.

Praise be to God!

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