

## **Palm Crosses**

*Mark 15: 25 - 39*

During the liturgical season of Lent, we have been sharing in a series of studies called 24 Hours That Changed the World. Each weekend, this being the sixth, we have been considering one event that took place during Jesus' last day. In addition to that focus in our worship services, there are many of you who are reading Adam Hamilton's book by the same title.

We have also formed about 25 small study groups as well, ranging from 5 – 15 people, which have been utilizing a DVD resource that was filmed in the Holy Land, a study in which participants have been invited to go deeper in their Lenten journey by asking yourselves week after week: "Where do *I* fit into this story?"

That same question has provided the focus for our worship services over the past six weeks as well. Because of that focus, (and I've been hearing this general comment frequently) many of us have been seeing the events centering around this 24 Hour period - the Last Supper, Gethsemane, Jesus' arrest and trial, the release of Barabbas, Jesus' torture and humiliation, etc., in a whole new light.

And, even though the journey has, perhaps, made us uncomfortable at times, it is nonetheless becoming more and more *real* to us. I have seen myself – at various times in my life – in *every character* in this story.

I've been the coward who has turned away from conflict because I wasn't willing to pay the price of being different. I've been the one who would rather be silent, instead of standing for what I knew was right at times – when I knew that stand would be unpopular, or would single me out. I have been Pilate trying to absolve myself of responsibility for choices I've made. I've been Judas, Peter and Barabbas; I've been in the company of those religious leaders who pooled their ignorance, and acted out of fear because of things they could not understand. I've been angry, and ungrateful, and unforgiving... this story is about me.

In every selfish, petty, fearful, inexplicable action that we've examined in this 24 Hour time frame... I've been there. It's been a humbling journey! As I tried to put it last week: one result

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of Jesus' presence among us is like a blazing white light that suddenly shines out in a dark room. Jesus reveals us as we are.

And, again, that is not always a totally flattering picture. We quoted the martyr John Bradford as he watched the criminals heading for the scaffold in London in the 1500's – "*There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford*", and we're understanding that a little better each week, I think. I know *I* am. As I read the headlines, and watch the news, and follow the latest celebrity *du jour* to publicly fail, I can say it: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." I am capable of all that.

As human beings created in the image of God, we are capable of wonderful achievements, we can do good things, we can help and heal. We can inspire. But under the right combination of circumstances, and peer pressure, we are also capable of choosing the most terrible things. Things that we, human beings, do to one another. Life and history bear that out.

We saw last week that part of the understanding of our Atonement was that God, in Christ, was taking on not only the price of our sin, but also taking on the hurt of our evil. He experienced all that was evil in this world, everything that we will experience, and more. And in triumphing over that, he has opened the door to a different way of life; a way of peace with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves. A way of forgiveness and caring, a way of *including others* in place of our natural rebellion, and our *excluding*.

Well, as we've been looking at these events in the last 24 hours of Jesus' life, and knowing that next weekend is Easter, there is only one event left for today that we haven't really talked about, yet, and that is the Crucifixion. So I find myself here today with that as our Series topic, but it comes, obviously, on this day in which the Church has traditionally celebrated Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And that makes for quite a contrast, as you can well see.

Historically, this day (which we call Palm Sunday) was the day in which Jesus entered – very intentionally - into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He came riding on a donkey – again, intentionally – to call attention to the words from the prophet Zechariah (9:9).

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*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!  
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
lowly and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

So, he chose the place, entering through the now sealed up Golden Gate into Jerusalem, and the means of transport, all to align himself with Prophecy and tradition about the coming Messiah. And the people understood – their shouts of “Hosanna!” (which roughly translates ‘save’!) indicates their readiness to receive him as their King.

They quoted Psalm 118:25-26 as well as they welcomed him into the city –

*LORD, save us!  
LORD, grant us success!  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.  
From the house of the LORD we bless you.*

The people were ready to receive him as their King. However, what Jesus had in mind and what they had in mind as far as Kingship, were two entirely different things – even to his own followers, the Disciples, who did not understand either. Jesus had no intention of coming as a political leader. He was not going to be the next ‘deliverer’, in the sense of kicking out the latest invaders to occupy their nation (this time it was the Romans).

Jesus told Pilate very clearly:

*“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”* (John 18:36)

His Kingship would be different. But he *was* a king. His deliverance would be different than the expectations of the people. But he *was* a deliverer. The celebrations of the crowds of Palm Sunday may have been off the mark, as far as what they *thought* they were celebrating, but as Jesus himself said, in response to some of the Pharisees who demanded that Jesus rebuke his disciples, this was an event worth celebrating:

*"I tell you," he replied, "if [the crowds] keep quiet, the stones themselves will cry out."*

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Something big was happening there. Jesus understood his connection to the history of his people, and to the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. I'd like to share with you a DVD clip from a sermon by Adam Hamilton, where he talks about how the Cross pulled so much of this history together.

[DVD Clip... the text to the DVD is very similar to the text of Hamilton's book, 24 Hours That Changed the World, p. 100 – 102. For the sake of those of you who read this sermon, I'm including that passage here:

As early as Genesis 4, we see human beings bringing sacrificial offerings to God. Grain, animal, wine, and monetary offerings were presented to God by mortals as expressions of gratitude, devotion, love, and worship. In bringing those offerings, believers were united with God. When LaVon and I give our tithes and offerings to God, we do so not simply to meet the church's budget or to win God's favor. Even though our offerings are an expression of our gratitude to God, they represent our desire to belong wholly to God, to honor and love him and put him first in our lives. Giving our tithes and offerings is an act of worship for us. In our ordinary lives, we often give gifts that express our appreciation, love, and devotion to another.

Sacrificial offerings are also a part of the process of expressing sorrow and repentance. When we hurt others, we are alienated from them until we have acknowledged our transgression, asked for forgiveness, and done what we can to make things right. When you get into a fight with your spouse and then realize you were in the wrong, what do you do? You might leave him a note the next day and look for ways to bless him as an expression of your regret and of your desire to be in right relationship with him. You might bring her flowers and tell her how sorry you are. In any case, thorough such expressions you atone for your sins. It is not that you cannot be forgiven without making such a gesture. In fact, we routinely receive forgiveness without offering a gift to the one we have hurt. But there are moments when the giving of a token to express one's regret makes a difference.

Likewise, in our relationship with God there is a need to acknowledge our sin, to repent of it, and to seek to make things right. In the Old Testament, God made provision for the people to make amends and be restored to a right relationship with him. They could do this by making sin offerings or guilt offerings. If you had violated God's will, you brought a special offering to the Lord to say, "I'm sorry for what I did, oh God. Please accept this offering as an expression of my remorse and my repentance. Forgive me and make me clean again." With such an offering, people could feel relieved of guilt and restored to a right relationship with God; so this was a regular part of worship.

Then, once a year on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur – there were special sacrifices. Even before there was a temple, there was a tent in which people met; and within the tent was the throne room of God. It was surrounded by a curtain; and inside was the ark of the covenant, the throne of God. Once a year the high priest was to offer a bull as a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of his family. He was to bathe, and then he and he alone would go inside the curtain. He would offer a goat as a sacrifice to God on behalf of the people, saying, "God, with this goat's blood offer this sacrifice, a living creature dying that you might forgive these people. I come on

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their behalf, pleading with you to forgive their sins and remember their sins no more.” It was a powerful drama demonstrating the seriousness of sin and the willingness of God to forgive. This sacrifice, along with a host of guilt offerings, was made not turn away God’s wrath, but to express the people’s repentance and their desire to be reconciled to God.

Once the goat was offered for the sins of the people, the priest would take a second goat and figuratively place the sins of the people upon it. This was the scapegoat, which was taken away from the dwellings and sent out into the wilderness. The people came to understand that, just as that goat had gone away, never to be seen again, their sins had been carried away.

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One way that we can understand the meaning of the Atonement, then, is to see it through the lens of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In his death, Jesus acted as the high priest representing all of humanity. In the Gospels, Jesus frequently refers to himself as the “Son of Man”, which was another reference to an Old Testament Messianic prophecy (Daniel 7:3) but it was also simply a title pointing to his role as a ‘representative human being’. He was God made flesh, he revealed God to us, but he was also fully human, he was what we were meant to be as human beings.

So in this way, Jesus became our priest who would intercede for us to God. He offered a sacrifice to God to atone for our sins, to reconcile us with the Father. And he didn’t offer a goat or a bull, he offered *himself* as the Son of Man and as our High Priest.

Hamilton writes; *“In essence, [Jesus] said, “Father, for these creatures, so small, so broken, so easily lured into hurting one another, for these men and women who do evil to one another and turn their backs on you – for them I offer myself to you to atone for their sins.”*<sup>1</sup>

And that is what he did. So this day is a day of contrasts for us.

On the one hand, we want to pass out the Palm Branches and wave them, and sing happy songs... but on the other hand we can also look ahead, and realize that the cost of our Deliverance was all those things we have been talking about and studying over the past six weeks.

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<sup>1</sup> 24 Hours That Changed the World, p. 103

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Consider again those words from the prophet Isaiah 53:

*He was despised and rejected by others,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*4 Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.*

*5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.*

*6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

*7 He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.*

*8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.*

*9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

*10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.*

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Every Palm Sunday I have fond remembrances of my father in law – Ambrose Salvatore. A few of you knew him, for a few years until he and my mother-in-law moved to Ocean City he attended this church, went to the 8:30 service. He was a quiet, no nonsense man, a stereotypical Italian immigrant – practical, hard working, had a garden in his backyard.

There's a lot you would never know about him, even if you were his acquaintance of his. He was not a person who talked about himself at all. He had a difficult life in some ways – being a teenager during the Great Depression; I do remember him telling me about how he and his cousin would walk along the Railroad tracks near Paulsboro, to look for butternut squash that fell off the trains. Simply so they could have something to eat that night.

He had serious struggle with alcohol for much of his life; it was for him, I suppose, a way of coping. And although his wife (Dianna's mother) became a Christian before Dianna was born, Ambrose resisted. For a long time. But I can still remember getting a phone call from New Jersey while I was a college freshman in Kentucky. Standing there on the only phone on the dorm's hallway, I heard her tell me, "Dad accepted the Lord today!"

He did, and God changed his heart and changed his life. He walked away from alcohol – immediately and completely. As far as I know, he never touched it again. He started caring for people, especially his family. He began to go to church – but I have to tell you, he never found a church he liked as much as this one! He drove up to Moorestown from Ocean City a couple of times after they moved... not only in time for the 8:30 service, but always the first one to arrive. And after church, he just went home; when Dianna asked why he didn't stop by, he looked confused, and simply said, "I came to go to church".

Somehow, in his life's journeys, Ambrose picked up an interesting skill. He made the best Palm Crosses I've ever seen. And he would make plenty of them, he made them for anyone who wanted to wait for him, every year on Palm Sunday. He taught my son, Brian, how to make them, too.

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He is gone, now, and was buried from out of this Sanctuary, his ashes are in our memorial garden. But on Palm Sunday, I think not just of him, but I think about those Crosses. I think about the combination of the celebration, the joy they represent that happened in that first Palm Sunday. I think also about the sadness of the Cross – the suffering, the anguish.

And I think about the Victory that emerged out of all that. And I remember my father in law, not just as a man, but almost as a symbol. A symbol of how God can come into a person's life. How the past can truly be wiped away. Forgiven. How new life can take hold of a person, no matter how old they are, and set in their ways, and it will grow... and how peace that passes understanding can blossom where there once was unrest and conflict.

The Palm Cross... such an appropriate symbol for this day. As we remember that what Jesus did was all for us. Out of the love of the Father for all people. His death on the Cross was a direct result of my sin and yours – as the song says, “It was my sin that held him there... until it was accomplished.” But because of that Sacrifice, I can sing today, waving my Palm... *“It is well, it is well with my soul.”*

Let's sing it....