

"Triumph or Tragedy?"

Psalm 53:1-5; Matthew 21:1-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 20, 2016 – Palm Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

During the Middle Ages plagues regularly swept through Europe. We really have no modern parallel to their devastation and the pain and suffering they caused. Even our recent scare with Ebola does not come close to the rapid spread and wide destruction of a true plague, thanks today to quick action and modern drugs.

A plague could hit anywhere, any time. It was a dreadful situation. Loved ones were abandoned, houses nailed shut, the dead left unburied, whole towns were emptied. Devastation swooped down from out of nowhere and wrecked havoc with all the lives it touched.

Years ago in Germany, in the town of Eisenheim, there was a monastery of the Order of St. Anthony. The monks who resided there dedicated themselves to the daily worship and service of God. They observed their vows conscientiously and lived their lives as best they could.

Now in that village, when the plague came, there was just one place an infected person could go, and that was to the monastery. There the monks, who had given their lives to Christ, also gave themselves to the care of those for whom our Savior died. So they received anyone into their cloister to give medical assistance in the limited way they could, and to provide comfort and strength.

Actually the term "infirmary" originated in the monasteries. It was a building erected by the monks to shelter the sick and infirm, the afflicted, and those who had nowhere else to go. The first hospitals were really those infirmaries constructed in the name of Christ. All of our modern medical complexes have their roots in just such simple buildings dedicated to the sick.

The "Burning Sickness" first swept across Europe in the 10th century. Every so often this plague returned, and one of those times was the 1500s. This new wave filled the infirmary at Eisenheim with victims of the terrible sickness. The first symptoms were boils on the arms and legs, then abscesses that turned gangrenous, and finally the complete loss of limbs. There was no cure once it had been contracted and few survived.

The monks of St. Anthony willingly ministered to the victims of this dreaded disease and thus exposed themselves as well. This is not something they had to do, but which they felt they must do. They entered into the suffering of their patients because of what they believed. They felt it to be their Christian duty.

Now today is Palm Sunday, a day of entry and celebration, but it's also known as Passion Sunday. This latter designation is confusing to many people who equate "passion" with something steamy, like an adult movie or late-night television. This is hardly the way it's meant liturgically.

"Passion" as used in this context means "suffering" and refers to the suffering of Jesus in his last week on earth. The word passion only appears once in Scripture, in the first chapter of Acts, where we have the expression "after his passion..." a paraphrase of the Greek words. The passion of Christ could be said to include the sufferings beginning with his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and ending with his death upon the cross. Actually it began with the realization of where his path would lead and his willingness to follow it.

Jesus did suffer. Born of a peasant woman, raised in poverty, apprenticed to a trade of tiring work, discouraged by setbacks, saddened by disappointment, moved to tears by what he saw, betrayed, wounded, abandoned, dying a tortuous death—Jesus knew it all.

What sets Jesus apart is that he chose to suffer. It was voluntary. He didn't suffer because of bad luck. He didn't suffer because of poor choices. He didn't suffer because of wrong behavior. Jesus didn't suffer because of happenstance, nor was he a masochist in search of it.

Jesus voluntarily chose to suffer as a redemption for humanity. He certainly could have escaped a great deal of pain. He needn't have gone to Jerusalem that fateful week. He had alternatives. He could have played it safe, as his disciples wished him to do, but his life and mission would have been incomplete if he had. He understood that a suffering world could only be redeemed by a suffering Savior. That's what took him to Jerusalem and to his death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote daily while he was awaiting execution in a Nazi concentration camp. His fate was sealed when he chose a course of defiance toward the evils of that regime. In his prison writings he links the voluntary suffering of Jesus with that of many of his disciples since then.

"It is infinitely easier," Bonhoeffer said, "to suffer in obedience to a human command than to accept suffering as free, responsible men. It is infinitely easier to suffer physical death than to endure spiritual suffering. Christ suffered as a free man alone, and since that day many Christians have suffered with him."

As Jesus journeyed from Jericho to Bethphage, he must have had a thousand thoughts running through his mind. He was on a path of his own choosing, yet in response to God's leading, and now it was drawing to a close. Whatever was to happen to him would happen in Jerusalem. This was to be the culmination of his ministry and obedient work.

Jesus instructs his disciples to go into Bethphage and to secure for him a donkey that is tied there and at the ready. He mounts his steed, a humble animal, but the one of his own choosing. As he entered Jerusalem the crowd spread their cloaks on the road in front of him and added palm branches from the flanking trees, making a royal carpet upon which to ride. It was a mere shadow of a grandiose Roman procession, yet in reality much more important than the arrival of any secular figure.

The air was filled with accolades at Jesus' appearance, but only he knew the extent of the suffering awaiting him. He could have dismounted right then, but he chose not to. He understood the danger ahead, but kept on going without hesitation. His thoughts came to center on others, and they became all important.

Some years back there was a newspaper story about one of those oil tycoons overseas who got religion. The man was advised that his lifestyle wasn't conducive to religious maturity and that he should experience the conditions of the poor in order to know something of their suffering.

So each morning he would arise, put on some old clothes, get a beggar's bowl, and leave his palatial residence. He would exit over expensive Persian rugs, get into the back seat of his Rolls Royce, and be chauffeured into the city. The car would wind its way through the hot, dusty streets until it reached the slums. Then this rich man would get out behind a grove of trees to now assume the role of a beggar on the streets.

When evening approached, and it was no longer safe to be in the city, the Rolls Royce would wend its way back through the ghetto and pick up the rich man. He would then be taken back to the comfort and safety of his magnificent home.

Now there are some similarities between this rich fellow and Jesus. Both put aside their ease to identify with the least of the people in society. But there the parallel ends. For the millionaire his time on the streets was a mere inconvenience; to Jesus, it was a way of life. To the wealthy individual it was only part of a day and part of a week; to Jesus, it was every day, all the time. To the former, he went to the streets for what he might gain from the act; to Jesus, he identified with the outcasts and marginalized for what it would do for them.

Jesus truly entered the life of all those whom he encountered. Nowhere was this more symbolically represented than on that particular day when he entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. He was coming into the midst of the people not as a dignitary, but as a servant. There was no gilded chariot for him, but instead a humble animal on which to ride.

This parade was a contrast to official processions of that time. There was no pomp, no hype, no attempt to make it bigger than life by creating an illusion of grandeur and importance. It was decidedly understated—no bands, no officials, no sponsors, no floats. Only a single man, with his disciples walking alongside him.

Yet, to those who received him with their hearts, this was the greatest of all triumphal marches. To those who recognized him as Redeemer, this indeed was their king coming on their behalf.

The message on this Palm Sunday is that we are invited to this parade as well. Not to be mere onlookers, but to recognize Jesus for the place he has in our lives. He is likewise our King, but one who willingly gave himself that we might find newness of life. He opens the door to our future and full potential, even as he reminds us that this includes sacrifice and difficulties as well.

So, "ride on, ride on in majesty." Ride on into our hearts, Lord Jesus, and let us walk with you and follow in your ways. May our lives be triumphal as well as we take our place in your march.