

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
16<sup>th</sup> March 2008  
The Sunday of the Passion  
Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Matthew 26:14-27:66  
Psalm 22:1-21

It's Passover, and me and my friends decided last week that we'd hit the road and go to Jerusalem. I actually hate that bloody city – it's the seat of power for those brutish Romans and I don't want to be anywhere near them. I'd rather be back here on my small farm, taking care of my few goats and sheep. But my buddies are all keen to have a lively weekend carousing – and, oh yeah, worshiping – so I guess it won't hurt to go with them.

Now the funny thing about this Passover is that I heard that Jesus guy is coming up from Galilee. He's an odd one, that Jesus. Oh, I'm not saying he might not be special – holy, even – perhaps a prophet. After all, he fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of tired old fish. He cured a guy who was born blind. He even raised his friend, Lazarus, from the dead. Oh, he's special, alright, and he says a lot of things I agree with about God and the Kingdom -- but I've also heard that *some* people think he's the Messiah. Well, he'd better watch out – those Roman thugs don't like that kind of talk. And I really don't think it would be very smart of him to show up in Jerusalem at this time of year.

Personally, I'd recommend he stay home.

We packed some bread and a bit of wine and started off on the road to The City. My God, I never saw so many people making the pilgrimage! I mean, I know Passover is important, but *sheesh* what a crowd!

As we got closer to Jerusalem, I saw a huge dustcloud over toward the east. "What's that," I asked a fellow traveler. "Well, it's probably Pilate and his soldiers. They're packing the city for Passover because they expect our crowd to make a ruckus. Pilate and his crew are ready for us – he brought in reinforcements just in case there's anyone who wants to stir up trouble."

I thought, "Hmmm, Jesus had better be careful and keep his disciples nearby."

As we got closer to the City, there was another duststorm, this time on the west side, near the gate. "What the heck is that," I asked my new friend. "I don't know – people have said Jesus and some of his followers were coming to Jerusalem, too – maybe that's them."

I thought..."Uh oh, sounds like trouble with a capital T."

We got closer and it was so hot. You Michiganders don't know the meaning of "hot". Hot enough to fry an egg on a brick. So hot we were all in a sweat.

And then we saw the crowd. There were all kinds of people – men, women, a bunch of kids, and they were all waving big palm leaves and sort of dancing around someone sitting on a donkey.

"Is that...is that...*Jesus*," I whispered to my buddy. He turned to me – there were tears in his eyes. "Welcome, stranger. That's him. That is our Lord. That is our Messiah. The Chosen One. The Son of God. Come on – let's join the celebration."

Well, you know how it is about mobs. Especially emotional ones. You kind of get caught up in them. I mean, here were hundreds, maybe thousands of people and they were all so excited and so *happy*! They were shouting "Hosannah" and "Blessed is he" and singing and dancing and waving those palms. You couldn't help but want to join in!

And Jesus – well, Jesus just sort of smiled with this, I don't know, this *radiant* look. Confident. Serene. At peace. Grateful. And modest. All the while people around him were making this big deal – this *very* big deal – about his arrival in Jerusalem.

So I joined them! Yes siree, I joined that crowd! And I felt so full of joy, so full of *gladness*! I even started wondering if Jesus might really be the Messiah all us Jews had been waiting for. The one who would get us out from under the awful tyranny of Rome. The one who might send their occupation troops packing back to their own place. The one who might bring us *peace*.

I sang and danced and whooped it up and grabbed a palm leaf *myself*, waving it and shouting for joy!

And then we got to the gate of the City...

And then I had to make a choice...

Indeed, that is where we all make a choice. Jesus is showing us a gate, an entrance into the Garden, an opening to *life*. But at the same time – if we go through that gate, we might find ourselves caught up in a mob, and violence – and we might end the day with our hands empty and stained with blood.

There's another choice, of course. *We could* just stand at the gate. *We could* avoid the passion and the torture, the joy and the fear, the emotions that might

carry us away toward a new heaven and a new earth – or a new version of hell. We could shrug with indifference. We could simply live in the status quo. It would be so much safer to be uncommitted.

What do we do?

Do we affirm our desire to live in the Garden – or would we prefer to live in the comfortable fear at the gate?

It is up to us, isn't it. Every day. It is up to us.

Are we willing to take the risks called for by our Lord? Are we willing to be countercultural, to cry for peace when others demand war, to feed the hungry when others say "it's their own fault"? Are we willing to speak of love when others speak of hate, to reach out our hand to the marginalized when others continue their exclusion?

Scary stuff, this Christian business. Scary stuff.

And wonderful stuff.

But there's no Easter in the lessons today. Nor will there be all week. Unless we can walk these paths, leaving our comfort zone, our self-satisfaction, daring to walk beyond safety into the darkness of evil and death, carrying Jesus to the tomb, we will not even begin to grasp the power of the Resurrection.

Innocence, guilt, accusations, lies, betrayal, suffering, death – the major themes of what we call Holy Week. We begin the week in procession with joy – and almost *immediately* we are led into the valley of despair. It's almost pathologically schizophrenic this journey of ours! It's no wonder people avoid Holy Week like the plague! They want the joy of Easter without the pain of the cross. "Give us something to feel good about! Isn't Christianity all about the good news?!?"

Of *course* it is.

But I suggest to you that the fullness of the celebration of Easter morning cannot be fully grasped unless we enter the darkness of Tenebrae on Wednesday. Unless we realize our humility and our humanity by washing the feet of a friend on Maundy Thursday. Unless we walk again the Street of Sorrows on Good Friday. And see the doors of the church *closed* on Holy Saturday.

We have choices. We can enter the gate toward the clamor of the crowd and the betrayal and the suffering to reach toward the joy – or we can remain at the gate and just wait for the party to happen. Afraid that our own emotions might get in the way, afraid that we might be spiritually moved in a way we've never experienced. Afraid we might be alone.

As Jesus would say, "Do not be afraid."

*God* will be with us all along the way.

And on Easter morning we will sing the A-word.

Amen.