

## Palm Sunday (B)

Mark 14:1 – 15:47

The accounting department of a large insurance company was working on year-end reports when the computer network went down. An emergency call was made to the systems analyst who didn't arrive until three hours later. Yet, even then, several clerks cheered, "Hooray, he's here, our savior!"

Without a word, the systems analyst turned to leave. "Where are you going?" the panicked accounting manager asked in alarm.

"I'm leaving," he replied with a slight smile. "I remember what they did to the last savior."

Hooray, he's here: our savior!

That's the way the week began so long ago in Jerusalem. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus entered the city in grand fashion with the crowds shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mk 11:9b-10).

Jesus was the only participant in the parade that day. There were no marching bands, no fancy floats, no clowns throwing candy to the people just the grand marshal—Jesus. But the crowds lined the streets as if it were the Macy's Parade on Thanksgiving Day.

I remember watching the Macy's parade on television as a young boy, waiting with great expectation for the arrival of that last float, which always carried Santa Claus. His arrival meant Christmas was not far behind. In our society, the time leading up to Christmas brings expectations of gifts. Children of all ages turn their attention towards that great day when presents will be opened, and expectations fulfilled.

A similar thing happened on that first Palm Sunday almost two thousand years ago. The Jews of the day welcomed Jesus as the Messiah, the ancestor of King David. They spread palm branches and clothing on the ground and welcomed him as their *political* savior. They thought of him as the "Santa Claus of the day"—bringing with him the gift of liberation from Roman oppression.

A week after his triumphal entry into the holy city, Jesus was the grand marshal of yet another parade. But this one was much different. There were no cries of Hosanna, no palm branches placed before him. The great hopes of the people had turned to disappointment. Jesus was not who they expected him to be.

That week certainly had its ups and downs for Jesus. I imagine it was like one of those white-water rafting trips with dangerous rapids. Jesus knew there were perils ahead, but he could do nothing about them except try to hang on, as the treacherous currents carried him along.

In a similar way, when we're hit by a tragedy in our lives it often feels as if we've been thrown into a roiling river of pain, with terrifying rapids. As much as we try to deny the reality, we know that the river is often in control—not us. It feels as if we're just along for the ride.

I think that must have been how Jesus felt that night in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed he might be spared his upcoming fate. He concluded his prayer, however, by acknowledging that the will of God should be done, not his own.

But what did he mean by that? Was it God's will that Jesus should suffer and die a gruesome death? Is it God's will that anybody should suffer in this life? Does God orchestrate the lives of every single person as if we were puppets and God were the puppeteer, granting some people happiness and others sorrow?

Theologians differ *greatly* on how to answer those questions, and no one can prove they have the definitive correct answer. Personally, I do not believe God holds all the puppet strings. I think God, in giving freedom to creation, allows the rivers of our lives to run freely, realizing there will be moments of suffering along the way, as well as moments of joy and excitement.

Those moments shape our lives, just as a flowing river shapes its surrounding terrain. The pivotal points in our lives can appear to be either positive or negative. But in either case, they bring with them changes in the contours of our lives. Some moments along the way, however, have a greater impact on us than others. And, like a river, our lives seem to be most affected when they become turbulent.

So, I submit to you that God does not lead us into the turbulent times, any more than God leads us into the smooth times. Instead, God helps us through both the good and the bad moments of our lives.

God uses the changes and chances of our lives to help us grow, to help us mature in our walk with others, as well as our walk with God. The trials and tribulations that come into our lives are not directed by God. But God does help us to use them for our benefit, rather than for our demise. That's the will of God!

Note, however, we have a part to play as well. We must be willing to learn from life's lessons. Quite often that means enduring the end of something in order to experience a new beginning. We must be willing to let go of one thing if we are to receive the benefit of another.

There's a story about a cheerful, bouncy, five-year old girl, named Jenny, who was waiting in the supermarket checkout line with her mother when she spotted a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. "Oh please, Mommy. Can I have them? Please?"

After glancing at the price, the mother looked down into the small pleading eyes of her daughter's upturned face. "\$9.95! That's a little less than \$10.00. If you really want them, I bet you could save enough money to buy them yourself."

Well, after a couple of weeks of extra chores around the house and emptying out her piggy bank, Jenny had enough money to buy the pearls. And she just loved them. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere.

Jenny had a very loving father and every night he would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a bedtime story. One night when he finished reading, he asked Jenny, “Do you love me?”

“Oh yes, Daddy. You know that I love you.”

“Well, then, can I have your pearls?”

“Oh no, not my pearls! You can have anything else, Daddy, but please don’t ask for my pearls.”

“That’s okay, Honey. Daddy loves you. Goodnight.” And he bent down and kissed her.

About a week later, Jenny’s father asked again, “Do you love me?”

“Daddy, you know that I love you very much.”

“Then give me your pearls.”

“Please Daddy, not my pearls. You can have anything else you want, but I can’t possibly give up my pearls.”

“That’s okay, dear. Sleep well. I love you.” And, as always, he bent down and kissed her goodnight.

A few nights later, when her father came into her room, he found Jenny sitting cross-legged on her bed trembling and crying softly. “Jenny, what’s the matter?” he asked.

In silence, she lifted up the pearls to her father. And with a quiver in her voice, she said, “Here, Daddy. These...these are for you.”

With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny’s father reached out with one hand to take the play necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny. He had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the play pearls, so he could give her the genuine treasure.

Life is a lot like Jenny’s experience. What God wishes for us doesn’t always meet our expectations. Often, to obtain the highest gift we must first give up the old. To obtain a life in tune with God and others, we must first give up our own selfishness. Before we can experience the resurrection, we must first experience the death.