

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 19:28-40

Here he comes – humble, in everyday street clothes. And the people line the way, throwing down palm branches, and waving them too, and applauding, and yelling. You would have heard all sorts of words yelled out, principle among them being – in Latin – *palma*.

Ultimately the procession reaches the temple, and halts. And prayer is offered, and dedications made, and sacrifices too. And then everyone disperses, all over Rome.

That's right – Rome! What I've described is a Roman "Triumph" – a victory parade for a hero of Rome, a defender of the Republic and, later, of the Empire. I guess the first clue was that Latin word *palma*, which, in English, means "Palm" – as in palm branch. In Jesus' time, the Latin word *palma* was a metonym – rather in the way that many people in England refer to the monarchy as "The Crown". Palms were so ubiquitous at Triumphs that the crowds yelled *palma* – "palms" – to mean "victory." Palms became synonymous with the victory itself.

All the gospel writers would have known about *Triumphs*. It's not difficult to see that they understood what happened that day on the Mount of Olives as Jesus' *Triumph*. The comparison was so close that the word very quickly became attached to the events of that day – what's this moment called, after all? "Jesus *Triumphal* entry into Jerusalem"!

By the second century, the Early Church understood this moment as a *Triumph* – a victory parade – for Jesus. And the word most closely identified with this day provided solid support for that view. The word? *Hosanna*. Today, we think of that word primarily as an expression of joy and praise for deliverance that will happen eight days later – the first Easter. But in the first century it was used more frequently to express joy and praise for *deliverance already granted*.

But wait! Don't victory parades happen *after* someone is victorious? How can *Hosanna* mean "Thank God for our freedom!"? Shouldn't it mean "Thank God we're gonna be free!"? In other words, aren't we getting ahead of ourselves? How can we have a victory parade *before* Easter?!

You might think that we're getting ahead of ourselves, because of what became the classical paradigm, the traditional understanding of the early Church Fathers of the 3rd and 4th centuries, about the mechanics of salvation – known by academics as atonement theory. There are several that fall into this category – classic views that are closely linked: the *ransom theory*, the *substitution theory*, and the *satisfaction theory*. They teach that the death of Christ was a ransom sacrifice, usually said to have been paid to Satan or to death itself, paid to God the Father, in satisfaction for the debt owed by human souls as a result of inherited sin. The substitution theory sees Jesus substituting himself for us to satisfy an angry and vindictive Father. Easter then becomes the confirmation that God the Father accepted that ransom paid to Satan, or accepted and was satisfied by Jesus' substitutionary death. In either case, this would explain why the Father raised Jesus from death.

That doesn't really say much that's good about "The Father" – does it!? The Father – that

masculine image of God – is self-defined as the angry, vindictive, judgmental figure that shows up in parts of the Old Testament. If that's who God is, I for one am not interested! Neither was the 2nd Century Church. And neither, really, was Jesus.

Ask yourself, then, this: what are we being told if this day is about a *Triumph* for Jesus; a day when the people were praising God for *something that had already happened*?

It means this, I think. That the true and primary saving event, the event that cost God the most, knowing what could happen; the event which showed God's intent at saving – or trying to save – us from the myriad failings of human existence – it wasn't the cross, it was the *incarnation* – the becoming flesh of Jesus; it was his birth.

This view has been one of the threads that is woven into Christian theology – you can see it particularly in the theology that develops from Francis of Assisi. To suggest that God intended no meaning or purpose for creation during the first 14.8 billion years, is extreme hubris! That view assumes that creation was just empty, waiting for sinful humans to set the only real drama into motion. That view assumes that the sun, moon, and galaxies had and have no divine significance; that the fish, the birds, the animals were just waiting for humans to appear, that God was simply twiddling the divine thumbs, waiting for us to show up and screw up! Jesus is, in this view, a mere afterthought – “Plan B” when the first plan didn't work out.

We humans can be pretty arrogant, can't we!! As Richard Rohr has said about this, the truth is that ***Jesus didn't come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.***

If, indeed, this day is a Triumph for Jesus; if this day is saying that in his birth Jesus brings us our freedom, then Christian faith is grounded in pure love and perfect freedom from the very beginning, not in some unfortunate denigration of human beings as inherently sinful failures, and of God as a vindictive and angry tyrant.

And what it says is this: nothing changed at the Place of the Skull – Golgotha – Calvary. Rather, what happened was that everything was revealed as God's suffering love, a love that frees us and enables us to change.

Augustine of Hippo (and many others) were wrong; Pelagius of Britannia (and many others) were right: it's not about Original Sin; it's about Original Blessing, “a very coherent and utterly positive spirituality, which draws people toward lives of inner depth, prayer, reconciliation, healing, and even universal “at-one-ment,” instead of mere sacrificial atonement.” (Richard Rohr)

Jesus' incarnation says to us that heroic sacrifices to earn God's love are over! The trouble with that is that if it's true then we can no longer ignore Jesus' lifestyle and preaching. Because that's what so many Christians down the ages, right up to today, have done. They are those who have embraced the idea that Jesus' death was a ransom, was a substitute for all of us, to satisfy an angry and abusive “God”. If that were true than all we really needed Jesus for was the last three

days or even three hours of his life.

“The irony is that Jesus undoes, undercuts, and defeats the sacrificial game.” So stop counting, measuring, deserving, judging, and punishing – things that so many of us, so many Christians, are very well trained in—because we were all told that this was the way God operated too.

Let it go. Let it go and you’ll find that all of a sudden the abundant world of God’s grace and love is suddenly accessible. For indeed, as the evangelist John said, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son [to be born into humanity], so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him....” (John 3:16f).

As you journey this week, think on these things. Not vengeance but love; not anger but love; not anything but love, only love, motivates our God, then, and now, and always. And God’s invitation to us is to do the same.