

Palm Sunday
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
April 9, 2017

This is the strangest church service of the year. It has two distinct parts that don't seem to fit together well.

Outside, we heard about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a faithful donkey—engaged in some political satire, or some resistance theater, or in a show of deep humility before his Passion--showing the world a different kind of King. Understand the choreography as you will, but there is no denying that this gesture is one of subversive triumph, of hope.

Jesus comes, and the poor and downtrodden of the city immediately recognize him as the King they have been waiting for. They lay palms and clothes at his feet so that dust and muck and dirt won't soil his robe.

This is reverence. This is adoration. This is the triumph of grace and humility after years of teaching and preaching love and compassion to anyone who would listen. This is the kind of God we serve. Hosanna. Hosanna.

And then we change. We sit and hear the words of the Passion—the betrayal; the senselessness of the violence and the corruption of the Roman state with its collaborators in the religious establishment. Our shared culpability in the execution of an innocent man who also happens to be God. Where are the Hosannas now?

As chemical attacks kill children a world away and missiles fall in brutal retaliation, I can't help but think of the savagery of our Passion story—of a world that can lean toward darkness. It's hard to remember the Hosannas in the midst of our penchant for violence, dehumanization, death.

I would rather spend my time thinking about the donkey than the cross.

But the cross is in our blood. It is in our Christian DNA. We are capable of great cruelty as a people when we really put our minds to it.

And so the Christian life is lived on this edge, on this borderland between the hope of the palms and the despair of the Passion.

I see both all around me, and I imagine you do too.

We know that this Passion is not the end of the story, but, just on this Sunday, I don't want us to leap too quickly to Easter glory.

Look at the Passion of God. Look at the cruelty of this world. Don't turn away. Look. See.

The margin can be uncomfortable. But there is truth here. Jesus' death is not the whole story, but it is one we see daily in our community, our city, our country, our world. The Passion and the suffering are real, and our place in that story is real too. Sometimes we shout Hosanna. Sometimes we shout 'Crucify Him!' This Christian life moves in this uncomfortable gray area. Mourn today with me. Reflect today with me—even as we enter into Holy Week and anticipate the glory of Easter. Amen.

