

John 12:12-16

Fear of Being Overtaken

Palm Sunday...a day we love to rejoice. It is one of the happiest services of the year with the palm branches giving us something to wave as we participate in worship and then take home to remind of us this joyful celebration.

For many of us we skip from this service of palm branches to Easter Sunday and we completely miss the point of it all, the basis for calling ourselves Christian. We miss the good news. So let's situate ourselves in the story. Use your imagination to see the story unfolding. It is the Passover festival, a time when crowds are coming into Jerusalem to celebrate, the city swelling with people everywhere.

Prior to where we picked up the story, Jesus has spent time at the home of Lazarus in Bethany. Now Lazarus is important to this whole thing because this was a man that Jesus had raised from the dead. Brought him to life right out of a tomb. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were all Jesus' friends and at this point in the story, Jesus was at their home to enjoy their company and hospitality before he headed into Jerusalem. It was here that Mary anointed Jesus with expensive perfume. Little did she know her actions were foreshadowing Jesus' death, the perfume preparing him for burial. It is also where Judas got upset with Jesus because of the expense that had been so lavishly poured on Jesus instead of being used to help others. Actually, Judas was siphoning from the funds so that was more his problem. Money gone meant less for him to skim.

When people learned that Jesus was in Bethany it became a spectacle as the gathering crowd not only wanted to see Jesus, but Lazarus, because Lazarus was the proof of what Jesus was capable of...bringing life from death! Now this was a problem for the chief priests of the faith as it meant that people were looking to Jesus for their hope and not paying attention to the demands and commands of these leaders. The chief priests began to plot how they could kill both Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus because he was leading people away from the power of the religious authorities and Lazarus because he was proof of Jesus' power.

So we get to the day when Jesus enters Jerusalem. Some of the other gospels tell this part of the story with greater detail. All that the Gospel of John tells us is that when Jesus was coming to Jerusalem people started laying down palm branches. This started even before Jesus got into the city. It was like rolling out the red carpet, but instead of carpet it was palm branches. Using palm branches for celebrations was a common occurrence. It didn't just happen for Jesus but happened whenever there was a dignitary approaching. And that is the crux, Jesus wasn't a dignitary, wasn't a ruler, and yet was getting recognized as such by the common crowd. Also, one can note that there

were two crowds gathering, the crowd that was coming into town from Bethany where they had gathered to see Jesus and Lazarus and the crowd from inside the city that was gathering and maybe even coming out of the city to greet Jesus.

Now we really cannot say how big this crowd was, there is no indication, but it was significant enough to incur the anger of the religious rulers and later in the week also the Roman authorities. It also struck fear into these powerful figures as they had no idea how powerful Jesus was. In fact, the last verse of the reading says, "The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see you can do nothing, Look, the world has gone after him!'" There were worried about their loss of power and influence.

For those in the crowd their fear was something different. They had feared from many years the crushing power of the Roman authorities, they feared for their well-being. They wondered how long before God would bring them the promised Messiah, the one spoken about in their Hebrew scriptures. Particularly in the writing of the prophet Zechariah there is much said about the suffering the people will face, but also promises a coming leader. The people assume it will be a powerful warrior much like in the good days of King David, but that is not the kind of leader that Zechariah speaks about. In Zechariah the prophet writes, Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (9:9).

That chapter in Zechariah goes on to describe a king that sounds like a powerful earthly king, but we humans don't think like God does. God comes to us in the form of a servant king. One who is ready to show his power by giving life, not by taking life. His kingship is not demonstrated in his ability to dominate but in the ways he came to serve. Again, Lazarus was the example of that new life, but people still did not understand. It was not until after Jesus' death and resurrection, as the disciples remembered all the things that had been written and done, that they began to see differently, to understand differently the kind of kingdom Jesus ruled, and the kind of power Jesus had and has.

And this is the good news! Jesus has power to restore life, to give life, to transform life, but he does it, not by overpowering us, or by dominating us, but rather coming to us as a servant king. One whose law is love. One who... if we remember our themes as we approached Christmas are also important to the Easter story...one who brings hope, peace, joy, and love into a world in as desperate need of it now as ever.

We are as fearful today of what can overtake us as the people were in Jesus' time. There are places around the globe that we can name where the threat of power to take life and dominate others is clear and evident. It is in these stories that we can remember that Jesus in his own time did not rule by dominating but by love and service, giving his life so others could live. He still gives his life for us. We are called to be peace makers in these times, to do what we can in our place in the world to hold others accountable for how the most vulnerable are treated.

The most powerful tool we have is our corporate prayer, but we can also speak up and show up in our communities where we see an abuse of power. We can stand with others who are suffering injustice, those who are afraid of being overtaken by the rulers and authorities of our time.

There are also those who fear being overtaken but physical or mental illness, or other situations and challenges in their lives. We all live with different levels of fear in our lives. As Markus Roskamp writes when talking about this series on fear, “Sometimes those fears and anxieties becomes so great they threaten to overtake us. They overtake our relationships, our joy, our purpose.”¹

Though we have fears, we are not left alone. Just as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, Jesus comes to us as a servant king. One who is with us in all our fears. One who promises to transform our fears so that we can live fully. And we are called to walk with each other and in community so that all can know that the Jesus who walked among people, who lived, died, and rose again as the king of life is still alive. Still bringing hope, peace, joy and love into the world through us and through the power of the Holy Spirit moving in the world.

Palm Sunday was the start of a week that amplified the tension, fear, and struggles of power in individuals and the community both spiritual and secular. It’s most intimate moments at the table with Jesus and his disciples at what we call the Last Supper, then the horror of the cross and crucifixion, the silence of Holy Saturday, and the amazing love and grace of Easter Sunday.

Whatever you come with, in worship or daily life, be it fear of what may overtake you, or with joy and peace, may this day and the coming days, remind you of God’s transforming and lifegiving power to overcome even death so that we are promised new life as we live and breath this day and also when our own death comes to us. We are all children of God, not only in this place but all people are God’s people. May we be signs of God’s response to power, so that no one need fear the powers that may threaten to overtake them or us.

We are the people of God, restored in community, to community, and for community. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

¹ Roskamp, Marcus. [Reformed Worship 122 © December 2016](#) Worship Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church. Used by permission.