

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

March 28, 2010  
*Palm / Passion Sunday*  
Luke 19:28-40 & Luke 23:1-25

## Why?

We've begun our service today by recalling the entry into Jerusalem by Jesus riding on the back of a colt. As he enters the city the crowds that welcome him do so by throwing their cloaks on the ground and shouting their praises to him. This day has come to be known as Palm Sunday because in the Gospel of John the branches of palm tress are mentioned as that which the crowd uses to wave their praise along with their shouts of hosanna—a word, by the way, that means “save us.” While Luke's gospel mentions neither palms or hosannas, the gist of the story is the same. Taken together, all four gospel writers make mention of this event which has become known as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This arrival in the capital city is the culmination of Jesus' 3-year journey throughout Palestine as he has sought to deliver his message of God's good news. He now enters the final chapter of his ministry as he comes into Jerusalem, the very heart of the Jewish faith—and what turns out to be the last 5 days of his ministry before his death.

The crowds shouting their praises, we're told by Luke, were doing so “for all the deeds of power that they had seen.” (Lk. 19:37) The healing of the sick, the curing of the lame, the miracles like the multiplication of loaves and fishes, the raising of the dead, along with the stunning and compelling teaching of Jesus, had led over 3 years to large groups of Jews and non-Jews alike in recognizing Jesus as someone more than a magician and good talker—much more! Even though Jesus never exercised his power in a political or institutional way, nevertheless it was the leaders of political and religious institutions that were taking notice of the growing influence of Jesus as the number of those following him seemed to be mushrooming. In fact the numbers following Jesus, symbolized by the crowd amassed around him during his entry, were downright unnerving to the Jewish leaders in particular. Because of the crowds' devotion, Jesus had become a threat to their own power however conventional it was. And this of course led to the series of events over 5 days and finally to the cross on which Jesus died—a series of events in Jesus' life known as the passion

Because the next time we gather here on a Sunday will be Easter Sunday with a very different type of celebration, it's vitally important that we know and experience the story of what happened between today and next Sunday. To that end, I want to read now the account of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. This comes later in the week, after Jesus has celebrated the Passover with his followers and after he has been arrested by the Roman authorities.

*[Read Luke 23:1-25]*

The question has been asked ever since the day on which Pilate sentenced Jesus to death: “Why?” Why was Jesus put to death? Why did Jesus have to die? In the case of Luke's gospel, the writer makes it clear beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus was guilty of no crime. There was no substantive evidence upon which the death sentence could be justified. In fact Pilate is shown to declare to the crowds that Jesus was innocent. Three times Pilate had the power to release Jesus—to let him go free—but each time the crowds, ever more riled up, demand that Jesus be given the death penalty. Three times Pilate could

have set Jesus free. But each of those three times Pilate was moved, not by any legal or judicial rationale, but by a desire to assuage the crowd. And so in the end, he relents and sets a sentenced criminal free, Barabbas, and sentences Jesus to death by crucifixion.

With no legal or judicial justification for his death, we are still left to ponder the question of “why?”

Bible scholars who have studied the 4 gospels point out that this 5-day period, known as the passion of Jesus, from Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem until his trial, is recounted in more detail than any other part of Jesus’ life. Three of the gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—each devote three full chapters to this part of the story, and the Gospel of John devotes 9 out of 21 chapters to it. Furthermore, there is more agreement among the 4 gospels about the details of the events in this last week than in much of the rest of Jesus’ life. “Some few scholars have even suggested that the passion and resurrection narratives were memorized and passed along as the tradition [by the early Christian community before the gospels were ever written down and recorded].” (Craddock, Fred C., *Interpretation: Luke; A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990, p. 251) With this in mind then, it becomes clear that from the very beginning of the Christian faith, it was understood as essential that Christians understand this passion narrative followed by the resurrection account as essential to the faith. The teachings of Jesus in the parables and miracles and other actions were understood as secondary to the primary affirmation that Jesus was sentenced to die on the cross, that he indeed died, and that he was raised from the dead three days later. So within this passion narrative what can we find to help us understand why Jesus had to die?

But before we do that I want to think back to last fall for a moment. Last fall our focus in our study and preaching was on better understanding Christian discipleship. Specifically we lifted up 6 marks of discipleship as a guide for living more faithfully. To review, the marks of discipleship are pray daily, worship weekly, read the Bible regularly, serve at and beyond First Presbyterian Church, nurture spiritual relationships, and give of my time, talent and resources. In one of the sermons that was preached during this time, you may recall that Jody said very clearly and emphatically that it’s not about me. Do you remember that? If you do, you’ll remember that she was talking about the second discipleship mark of “worship weekly.” The point she was making is that worship and our participation in worship is not about me. Rather it is about God, all about God, glorifying and praising God and offering our thanksgiving to God for all the blessings of this life. The phrase, “It’s not about me,” struck a chord with many folks who would quote it back to themselves and others when the focus seemed to be moving away from God and onto ourselves. It’s a helpful reminder when we think about our worship life.

I got to thinking about this phrase recently when I was pondering this mystery of the passion and the question of why Jesus died. This phrase came to mind because I found myself focusing on how Jesus’ death is about us. It’s about each of us, you and me, individually, and it’s about us together as well. As I reflected on how the death of Jesus is a gift to each of us, this warning phrase “It’s not about me,” appeared on the viewscreen of my mind. It stopped me in my tracks at first. But then I realized that this maxim does not apply in this case, because the truth is that it is about me when it comes to understanding the death of Jesus.

By Jesus going to his death, and by his suffering in the horrendous way in which crucifixion brings about death, Jesus demonstrated his total and complete solidarity with the human beings for whom he came to save. Whatever suffering is experienced in this life—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual—Jesus has been there for us too. Whatever sense of abandonment and loneliness is experienced in this life—Jesus has been there for us too. In two of the gospel accounts of Jesus' death, Jesus is reported to utter the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps.22:1) Even Jesus, the Son of God, experienced the sense of hopelessness and abandonment as he faced his final moments.

My friends, when it comes to the death of Jesus, it is about you. It's all about you. It's all about me. It's all about Jesus' amazing love that took him all the way to his death to show it to us so completely.

You know, as Christians it's nearly impossible if not impossible for us to ponder Jesus' death for us apart from our knowledge of what is coming on Easter Sunday when we will be looking not at the cross with Jesus dying on it, but rather at the empty cross that has become for us a treasured sacred symbol of Jesus' being raised from the dead. And that is for you and me too. Every Sunday, even today, is a celebration of that amazing resurrection. And that amazing good news is too good and too amazing to completely hide away.

But I want to encourage you to not shy away from the reality that Jesus did in fact die, that the death he experienced was a horrible death, that the anguish and pain and abandonment that he experienced was as bad and even worse than anything you or I or anyone else has ever experienced or will experience. It's all about me. Jesus' death that is. It's all about you. Jesus' death that is.

Our services this week on Thursday and on Friday are offered as an opportunity to ponder more thoroughly this amazing passion of our Lord Jesus. I hope that we will be together, you and I, at one or more of these events. From here on out in today's service, our focus becomes meditative and reflective on Jesus' passion as well, as we offer our thanksgiving to God for Jesus, who came to die that we might live.