

Sermon for Palm Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Palm Sunday. Lord, have mercy, here we go. It's the beginning of Holy Week, folks, and that means we take one of the most consequential stories in human history, distill down it into an essential oil, and sprinkle it over our lives for the next seven days. It'll be an amazing ride -- it always is -- it'll be an amazing ride, and I know that we'll, each of us, emerge Easter Sunday somehow changed. I don't know how, I just know it's true, and sometimes it takes a mighty long time to see what's shifted. The stone rolls away from all sorts of tombs next week, and the sacred steps out, blinks in the sun, and moves in the world and in us new and new again. But that's next week. And we've got a long way to go before we get there. Jesus is only just now making his way into the great city, his disciples making their way just like us, proclaiming all glory, laud, and honor onto one man, one God, borne on the back of a humble steed. I can't help but imagine Don Quixote's scraggly Rosinante, fit not even for a saddle but bearing the humble and gentle knight. But in spite of the Rosinantes and the humilities and the gentleness, there's pomp to this procession.

In the story, that makes perfect sense. The Disciples don't know what's coming. They're ecstatic, delighted that Jesus enters as triumphantly as a conquering king, or at least as close a pantomime as the poor can manage. But they don't know where this road leads. We do. And still we proceed. We know the palms we wave, the songs we sing, the story we tell, we know that it leads to tragedy and danger and a pain that knocks knees out from under us. We know all this. And still we gather in, growing closer to the Christ we know will be crucified in just a few days.

I just finished reading a book, set of interviews with Nick Cave, the singer. The collection's aptly named "Faith, Hope, and Carnage." There's quite a bit of discussion of his creative life, which is interesting, especially if you're musically inclined. But what really makes this book so phenomenal are his encounters with grief. See, years ago, Nick Cave's son died suddenly, and he and his wife lay shattered in the aftermath. The tragedy rearranged and redefined everything about who he was, and his creative endeavors reflected a changed soul. He mentions a mundane scene in one of his songs, a single line recalling his wife sitting at the kitchen table listening to the radio. For most of us, it's a familiar image of a loved one, or close enough to be accessible. But for him, it breaks his heart anew every time he sings it. Because that's the last memory he has of his wife unbroken, just before the phone rang. But still he sings his song. Still he remembers, forces himself to remember, that final moment when life was still kind. Still he remembers to remind himself that life can be kind, again, if not now, some day. Some day, she'll sit at the kitchen table and listen, again. Some day.

At one point, the singer describes hope as "optimism with a broken heart." Optimism with a broken heart. Even though he knows the world can be cruel -- you know, maybe that's not the right word. "Cruel" implies some agency, that the world means to hurt. Maybe it's better to say he knows the world can be oblivious, "no respecter of persons," as a wise soul described it -- So, even though he knows the world can be oblivious to the vulnerability of our hearts, he doesn't consider himself a pessimist. He hopes, every day, but he knows real suffering. And in spite of that, he still looks for something good to come.

While Jesus enters Jerusalem today and we get a flash of what the coming week holds, I'm entering this week with a broken heart. I know Easter Sunday has arrived every year, 2000 years running. There's nothing different about this year to keep it from coming, and yet, and yet I'm here wondering just how much life Easter brings back for us. And I'm looking, desperately, ahead to next week, wishing I could skip the grief and arrive straight at the joy. It'd be so much simpler and I'd go through fewer kleenex. But that's not gonna happen. I can't skip it, and truth be told, while it might be a relief, I'd miss something deeply important if the grief could be avoided. And you know, even though I know Easter will come, today I'm leaning a little closer to the tomb

and the grace it holds before the stone rolls away. There's a tenderness and a love to the grave, a finality of sorts but also a deep care to what happens in that place.

Before the coming miracle of Easter, before Mary Magdalene's faithful surprise, before the stone seals our savior away, love cares for Christ. His followers beg for his body. The women in his life bathe and anoint him. He's swaddled in cloth. A distant acquaintance donates a plot. His body, delicately laid to rest. And there he lies, loved by many hands in many ways one last time. And while they weep, they're reminded of their love and the many stories they have to tell. Though they know not where the road leads next, they do know they had something extraordinary and a hole remains where once he stood. And that's the road we walk this week. We know where we're headed. We know the well-trod path of joy to next Sunday, and we know the oft-lamented road to Good Friday. We know that, and still we take our first steps today, optimistic and broken hearted, we hope.