

Faith Mennonite Church  
April 17, 2011 – Palm/Passion Sunday  
Becoming Human: Shaped by Struggle  
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### **From coronation to the cross**

*Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 26:36-46*

Today we begin Holy Week, eight days that take us from the heights to the depths of our faith and back again. During this week we remember and reenact the drama of Jesus' final days on earth and we ponder the meaning of his death. The reality of our human experience is writ large in the story of this week:

- our human desire for leadership that frees us from oppression;
- our desire to celebrate and believe we are on the winning side;
- our struggle to remain loyal and keep hope when dreams are shattered;
- our struggle to be attentive and stay awake when life becomes overwhelming;
- our struggle to accept that only in dying can we find eternal life.

The Holy Week story is the story of Jesus, the story of the disciples, his intimate friends, and those followed at a distance. And it is our story, we who continue to follow Jesus today.

The events of popular uprisings throughout the Middle East in the past several months offer a glimpse of the likely socio-political environment in Palestine during Jesus' life and ministry. The Jewish people longed for change—for release from Roman rule, for respect for their religious practices. Their hope was not in a people's democracy, but in a Messiah, one sent by God to usher in a new day of shalom, of peace and prosperity with a righteous monarch. They were familiar with the oracle that came to the prophet Zechariah, many years earlier, that God's triumphant and victorious king would come in humility, riding on a donkey.

So they weren't impressed when Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, rode into the city on a magnificent war horse, with his imperial soldiers following at attention. No, their hopes were ignited by the rabbi Jesus, the one who had taught and healed them, the one who multiplied bread for the crowds, the one who was loving and compassionate, who reached out to touch and to eat with the lowliest. This one, Jesus, who came quietly into the city from another direction, riding a borrowed donkey. This is the one they waved their palm branches for to signal their allegiance. This is the one for whom they threw down their coats and shawls to pave the way. At last, it was happening! The dawn of a new age was breaking!

Then, just as quietly as Jesus descended on the city, he slipped away. Before they could crown him and watch him miraculously wipe out the Romans, as in the stories of the battles of old that had been told by one generation to the next, Jesus was gone. Imagine yourself sitting in a theatre, mid way through a movie, when a technical glitch occurs. The movie stops abruptly. We expect a quick fix—and usually get it—so the show can go on. But imagine our disappointment if the movie restarted with a totally different story line. The characters and the setting are the same, but the plot has changed. Imagine the fury in the theatre as angry patrons ask for the original movie or for their money back. Just so, the story that resumed in Jerusalem wasn't a continuation of what the crowds expected.

The expectant crowds certainly imagined Jesus retreating to a strategy session, garnering strength for a large campaign the next day. But Jesus retreated with his disciples to talk about

something very different. The chapters in Matthew, between the triumphal entry and the Last Supper contain

- parables of the kingdom
- stories of reversal in which invited guests don't show for a wedding celebration so the host invites anyone who can be found off the streets
- the announcement of the greatest commandment—to love God & our neighbor as ourselves;
- apocalyptic stories of judgment with the reminder that what we do for the poor will be recorded as what we do for Jesus, and
- the forecasting of Jesus' death.

None of Jesus' teaching was overtly aimed at the Roman occupation. It was certainly not a call to arms. But it did undermine the very foundation of Roman rule and of the uneasy accommodation that the Jewish authorities had settled for.

So just days after the crowds hailed Jesus as the Promised One, they scattered, or worse, they rose in opposition when he didn't lead their rebellion. He rebelled, indeed, but he did so in love. He rebelled against the notion that ultimate power rests in violence. He rebelled against the notion that God's love is confined to a single group of people. He rebelled against the notion that some lives are more important than others.

At the Last Supper Jesus took bread and wine, familiar elements from daily life, but symbolic elements of the Passover in which the Jewish community commemorated their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Bread and wine, both of which require the process of crushing—of grain and of grapes. Jesus seemed ready to accept the bread and wine as emblematic of his own end: “This is my body for you,” he said, as he broke the bread. “This is my blood,” as he shared the wine. Do this to remember me.

But his own pressing was yet to come. Matthew records that after the Last Supper, Jesus took his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, near the Mount of Olives. The name Gethsemane means “oil press.” And the account of Jesus' prayerful struggle is an account of the press of a difficult decision. The surety with which he spoke when he was at table breaking the bread is gone. He is in anguish. He is distraught. He asks God, his heavenly parent, if he is truly understanding the path. Or is there another way?

Although Jesus had anticipated his death and certainly knew that going to Jerusalem was a dangerous direction, death in close proximity was a stark reality. Death at the hands of the Romans was not a death in the comforting care of family and loved ones. It was a death of mockery and humility. Crucifixion was a means of terrorizing victims and any who might be tempted to follow. People were stripped naked and hung in painful vulnerability before any who dared watch. It served the same purpose as the lynching of black (and poor white) persons in this country in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although the disciples dozed and could not pray with and support Jesus in the way he asked of them, he came through the press with a renewed commitment and assurance that God was with him. The story quickly turns from Jesus praying in the garden to the arrival of the police, guided by Judas, who come to arrest Jesus. Jesus doesn't shrink back. He greets Judas and calls him “friend.” And he heals the high priests' servant when a small skirmish breaks out and Peter tries to defend Jesus with a sword.

From now on Jesus is resolved to follow the path to the cross. He will befuddle the Jewish leaders, Herod, and Pontius Pilate by his amazing calm, his spare words, and his lack of fear. As the early hymn, recorded in the letter to Philippians states:

though he was in the form of God,  
[he] did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

This is an unsettling story, but it is a holy story. We stop today at the point of surrender, of impending death. That is where we will dwell this week, with life on hold. Are you living in the press of a decision? Are you feeling the anguish of being alone as Jesus did when the disciples slept? Do you wonder if the path you (or we as a congregation) are choosing is the right one? Then you are at home in this story. You have a companion who has walked the road. Go with Jesus, go to Gethsemane and pray with him. Go to the room where we will break bread and share the cup with him. Go and hover at the cross, even if you must gaze from afar, and behold the depth of his love for you. But do not run from this week, for Jesus said “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, where is its life?”

The way of the cross is our way to life. Let us follow.