

Palm/Passion Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21:1-11

“HOW BE FREE?”

How long will it be till we are all truly free?
That’s the question buried deep in the hearts of the people
crowding into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

PASSOVER ... The grand annual celebration when the
people of God remember the days ... the years ... when
they were captive in Egypt. Slaves under the Egyptians.

Building marvelous structures and monuments
while serving under stern, cruel taskmasters. Dying
under their whip.

While all the days dreaming of home. A land
promised them by their God. A land of peace
... ruled by their loving God.

Then finally liberation from Egypt. Death mysteriously
visited the houses of Egyptian families ... but the houses
marked by the blood of lambs ... those families were safe
... safe to travel northward ... to home.

To a homeland they would call their own ... and
they would be secure...and live in peace.

HOW LONG WILL IT BE TILL WE ALL ARE TRULY FREE?

It’s an arduous journey to freedom ... crossing the Red sea
with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit.

Wandering for 40 years in wilderness while those
who too quickly tired of the journey, and complained
of food and water rations and begged to return back
to Egypt where the living was more comfortable ...
till those naysayers and complainers had died.

These people of God received a code of conduct – which, though simple and brief, actually just ten rules for faithful living, was deemed by many to be too difficult to follow ... or too loose, too undefined – so they demanded more explanation/ more detail.

They wanted to assure that they would make no mis-step. And especially that others would make no slip-up. So the way home became even more excruciating.

HOW LONG WILL IT BE TILL WE ALL ARE TRULY FREE?

But every year these who counted themselves God's people paused and remembered ...

they celebrated their release from bondage in Egypt as they moved closer to home.

They remembered that an angel of death passed over their homes in Egypt (marked with lamb's blood) that protected them and sent them on their way north to freedom.

To make a very long story short ... the people of God finally arrived home. Across the river Jordan. Through many dangers, toils and snares ... they finally reached the land God had promised. And on a knoll they built a temple ... look what God has accomplished ... and we are God's people. And we are thankful. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Home ... I suppose. But the struggles, and skirmishes, and defeats, and victories ... and more defeats, continued. There were false starts and false prophets.

There were times the people of God were conquerors. And more times when they were conquered.

Once they were scattered by their conquerors. Another time driven into exile in Babylon.

And the most devout of them promised “never again will we stray from God’s way ... we will remain faithful to the Lord our God.

And when they returned back home they enthusiastically restored the walls of Jerusalem ... and rebuilt the Temple even more magnificent than before.

And this question continued to be breathed ...HOW LONG WILL IT BE TILL WE ALL ARE TRULY FREE?

And amid other mayhem, Antiochus Epiphanes set-up a statue of Jupiter, a Greek god, in the Holy of Holies, And ordered that a pig be sacrificed in their beloved Temple

and he tore down the walls of the city. No they were wide open to any raiding band and any unsavory belief that could only further upset their way of life.

And now it’s the Romans who rule the land ... who rule their homeland. How we despise these foreigners ... they conquer us ... and rule over us.

They exact taxes from us and then send those monies back to Rome to build lavish palaces for their Caesars and networks of roads so they can more easily exert their power over us.

And the Romans have coopted Jewish leaders, the chief priests, scribes and elders to maintain and assure Roman control.

Fear permeates our homeland. Wooden crosses draped with dying or dead offenders mar the roadways ... reminding people that dissent is punishable by hideous death.

And our religious leaders – the Pharisees and the Sadducees – continue fussing over the law of Moses ...defining and redefining – making certain that every question is answered ... every eventuality covered ... every jot and tittle obeyed.

The Biblical scholars are not satisfied to simply affirm, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind ... and your neighbor as you love yourself.” **And then reflect that Love of God in their own lives.**

HOW LONG WILL IT BE TILL WE ALL ARE TRULY FREE? That question continues to burn in the hearts of so many.

And every year... in the springtime ... people of God swarm to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. To remember how God had led them out of bondage in Egypt to bear good news ...

... a special way of living. They had experienced God as freedom ... as hope ... as joy ... as love, and so, in thanksgiving, they would give that back to others ...they would give back to God’s world.

But also, at Passover, there was sad lament – for some people, pent-up fury – searing reminders that they were **not** free. That they’re still living under Roman rule. Controlled by outsiders.

Controlled by those who had no respect for their traditions of faith. And the faith of their forebears has had life and joy and love and hope squeezed from it.

But spring is in the air. Passover always reawakens persistent/fervent hope. **THERE IS COMING A DAY ... THERE IS COMING A TIME ...WHEN THE TABLES WILL BE TURNED ... AND WE WILL BE FREE. And our oppressors will be tossed into the sea.**

Now this particular year, the buzz is about Jesus. He has been teaching and preaching out in the countryside ... along the Galilean lakeshore ... in Jericho ... and in the plains along the Jordan river.

You know him. He’s Mary and Joseph’s boy ... from Nazareth. But you know, nothing good ever came out of Nazareth. Yet they report that he heals ... and he teaches

with God-inspired authority. Some say they have seen him raise people from the dead. **I wonder ... could Jesus be the Messiah?** The one promised by the prophets of old? The one who will drive the detested Romans out of our land?

Yes, that's the buzz in Jerusalem ... more than a buzz ... really, a tremor. Like pre-shocks that warn of an earthquake. Everyone is preparing.

Roman officers are in town ... Pontius Pilate, Governor of the realm, with his troops and lackeys have marched down from Caesarea. They will assure that everything remains calm and under control. Law and order will be maintained.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees have debated with this Jesus in the past but in lesser known places. They know the Holy Scriptures in full detail and they know all the proper interpretations ... Jesus has nothing new to offer. Jesus will be revealed as an upstart ... a shallow, wonderworking fraud.

As the common people swarm around Jesus ... welcome Jesus through Jerusalem's gate they sense a new day ... the day of the Lord. The time when God begins to set things right. Justice will be served.

Palm branches are waved to welcome victors in battle.
To celebrate military heroes who had saved the people from their enemies.

This throng waves palm branches and cries out hosannas – holy hurrahs -- because they anticipate that Jesus will save them from this oppressive Roman occupation. Anything beyond that is gravy. Icing on the cake.

But Jesus, this king of the Jews doesn't act very kingly. Riding a donkey. A borrowed donkey. Do you get that?

In just a few days he's arrested ... mocked ... put on trial. Not just a trial by the Roman governor, but a

trial by the religious authorities. And the verdict.
GUILTY.

And when the crowds realize that Jesus isn't the kind of
 conquering war hero they had expected,
 that he's not going to defeat the hated Romans and
 push them into the sea,
 they turn against him. Their disappointment
 turns into rage.

Having no one to defend him ... no one to
 speak for him. No one to put in a
 good word, (Nor does Jesus say a mumbling
 word in his defense) Jesus is condemned to
 death... and hung on a cross of wood exactly
 like a common criminal.

What are our expectations about how God saves?
 How God makes us whole.
 How God creates harmony?
 Do we set-up ourselves for disappointment because
 we confuse ways of human victory with God's saving
 ... God's amazing grace?

The crucial revelation of Palm Sunday is this:
 God doesn't save us in ways we might expect.
 God doesn't rule the way humans rule.

HOW LONG WILL IT BE TILL WE ARE ALL TRULY FREE?

LOOK, God dominates with love, not violence.
 God overpowers through sacrifice.
 God gains through suffering ...
 We gain ... we grow by aligning
 ourselves with those who suffer – who
 hunger and thirst for righteousness.
That's God's way.

Towards the end Christ dies.
 But God's salvation continues to unfold through us.

The image of Christ crucified body hanging in agony from the cross lingers in my spirit in these days.

But so do these words from Teresa of Avila:

**“Christ has no body now on earth than yours.”
THAN OURS**

That is our hope. That is our mission.

AND IN THAT SPIRIT WE ARE TRULY FREE.