

**The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
March 28, 2010
Palm Sunday**

This is the fourth year in a row that I have had to come up with a sermon for Palm Sunday. I wish I could say that it gets easier. But it does not. The liturgy for this day basically puts us on a roller coaster, whether we are scared of heights or not. This liturgy is truly the work of the people. We all take part in the procession as Jesus enters into Jerusalem, riding on a colt. We each get to sing "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." We each get to join the parade and usher in the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

As Jesus makes his final approach to Jerusalem, we come to the end of our Lenten journey. In some small way, each of us hopes that there will be a different end to the Good Friday story. Isn't there any other way God? And then, in the blink of an eye, as if we are fast forwarding the move, Holy Week flashes before us, and our liturgy puts those horrible words on our very lips, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And they do. And we do.

And that is the very struggle we each experience. I could delve into the ways in which Luke's story differs from the other gospel narratives. I could focus only on the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. I could pick out one of the characters and pinpoint their own internal struggles. But as illuminating as that might be, perhaps we don't have to. If we really want to understand what those people who were actually there in town were experiencing, if we really want to know what happened that very day and week, we need look no further than ourselves. We only need to dig down into our hearts and look at our own behaviors in order to fully make the journey of Holy Week.

Because I conjecture that most of you are no different from me. The hardest part of hearing the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ is not his public humiliation and painful death. The hardest part is not the tearful grief of his adoring mother or the soon-to-be leaderless disciples. The hardest part is knowing that we are each capable of life and of death.

Each of us has within us the ability to bow down at the name of Jesus one minute and walk by on the other side of him as he lies in the gutter then next. One morning I can be lost in wonder and and praise because of God's goodness and love and the next evening make a cruel judgment behind the back of someone I love the most.

There are some days I'm willing to give my neighbor the shirt off my back and other days when I charge a designer shirt that I hardly need all the while claiming to be grateful for the grace that has been showered upon me day after day. Some days I'm willing to wash the very feet of my friends at the whisper of their pain, and other days I fail to even return their email.

I know I am not alone. We are only human. It's easy to be part of the cheering crowd and wave our palm branches. It's easy when we're here doing the work of the people, the liturgy, together. But out there in the real world it's a whole other story. It turns out that following Jesus is more than just cheering from the sidelines.

This is not a week in the church when we can just go grab our digital cameras and snap photos of the excitement. This is the week in our church year when we too are part of the story. This is the week we have to experience and not just watch. That seems to be a problem with us lately. When we were last on vacation, I did watch from the sidelines a little bit. It turns out there are a lot of people who go on vacation and never put the cameras down. Perhaps it's because our technological devices are cheap now and we no

longer have to worry about buy film and getting it developed. There is instant gratification in seeing the moment on that little screen. Whenever you take a picture of a little child now, immediately they want to see themselves on that screen.

That's all fine and good and one day we'll look back and enjoy those pictures if our computers can hold them. But what about the experience? What are we missing if we are watching from above and not engaged in what's going on? What if the whole journey is not about capturing the moment in time but about living and experiencing it? What if we're reviewing the snapshots of this Holy Week in order to avoid the suffering and the painful reality that without it, we are but dust?

How could those crowds be so fickle that day? Cheering for this superstar King one day and calling for his blood the next? Well, perhaps they were just like us. Afraid to get involved to make a change. Afraid to ask the difficult questions. Afraid to take on authority. Afraid to seek out a different answer. Afraid to speak up when silence would be easier. Afraid to stand up when taking a nap might seem more productive.

And so we too are found guilty on that day along with Jesus. No one came forward to rescue him. No one stayed when he was arrested. No one could be found. We separate ourselves from God and in the process betray him and ourselves. But our liturgy goes on. We do not get the punishment we deserve. Our sentence is that we need to live. The cross of Christ is not a sentence of condemnation and death but rather an instrument of forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus pronounces that sentence himself from the cross. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." "Jesus forgives us, and asks the Father to forgive us as well. We deserved death, we have chosen to separate ourselves from God, but God spares us because he knows who we are, and what we are capable of."ⁱ

"Once the sentence is pronounced, it is acted out in communion. When we come forward to receive communion, we are being offered the very life of the one who died upon the cross because of our sins. Humbly we should approach with thankfulness in our hearts. We have not only been forgiven in word, but we have been given new life in the body and blood of the one who died for us."ⁱⁱ

Yes this is a difficult day to be in church. It is not for the fainthearted. It is supposed to be a hard day, because the Christian life and journey are supposed to be a challenge. A challenge to do better -- to look in the mirror and see that we are indeed capable of good and bad. Surely it is not an image we like to seek looking back at us. But we all have that image because we are human.

Yet even though we see ourselves in the story today, we are reminded that God's image of us is one of new life. God's image for us is love. This Holy Week is not about us. This Holy Week is about God's love for us. This Holy Week is about a God who always wants to be in relationship with us, just as we are, broken and yet capable -- capable of sharing God's love and choosing right over wrong.

The liturgy of this week is not yet complete. Let us enter into it in great humility. It is not easy because our emotions are raw and our lives are vulnerable. But we can also enter into this week with joy and anticipation of the power of God and the knowledge that God's love is capable of transforming us with his mercy. And so we enter into this week with thanks for the hope we have, not in ourselves but in God's grace that never lets us go, regardless of our choices. Amen.

ⁱ The Rev. David Klutterman is interim Rector of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist in Wausau, WI, Diocese of Fond du Lac. In addition to the duties of the parish, Father Klutterman is active in education/ information at all levels of the Episcopal Church. http://ecusa.anglican.org/sermons_that_work_7862_ENG_HTML.htm

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*