

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**
Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on March 29, 2015)

Please note:

For this Palm Sunday service of worship, liturgist Kim Van Horsen and Pastor Donald offered the scriptures and part of the Reflection in dramatic form which has been included here for you.

Proclaiming John 12:12-16 (NRSV)

KIM: For the past five weeks of the Season of Lent we have been preparing... preparing for this moment in the story of Jesus' journey.

Pastor D: Today is the day we celebrate Palm/Passion Sunday.

KIM: This is the day on which, our tradition tells us, Jesus entered Jerusalem, just days before his death.

Pastor D: Let us imagine we have come to Jerusalem along with so many others to celebrate the Passover as John sets the scene for us in his Gospel...

Kim: The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

Pastor D: So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!"

Kim: Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

Pastor D: His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Reading Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (NRSV) Antiphonally/Isaiah 50:4-9a (The Inclusive Bible)

KIM: Palm Sunday, which we also observe today as Passion Sunday, sets the stage of contrasts that is Holy Week: Jubilant crowds hailing Jesus as God's chosen one this morning contrast with those angry crowds calling for Jesus' execution as the week progresses.

Pastor: Palm Sunday marks the point of no return for Jesus. When he gave no excuse for direct Roman action, Jerusalem's Jewish elites were forced to find another way to silence him. The story shows what made Jesus so dangerous in their eyes. Bad enough that he entered the city in a way calculated to whip up Messianic fervor.

KIM: Scriptures from the Greek testament which tell the story of the Passion of the Christ will be the focus of our Holy Week services as we commemorate Maundy Thursday on Thursday night in Montebello and Good Friday here in San Marino.

Pastor: But for today, we are looking at scriptures from this week's Liturgy of the Passion that come to us from the Hebrew Scriptures, aka the old testament and realizing the universality and timelessness of this Lenten journey we find ourselves on.

KIM: We begin with Psalm 118, a pilgrims' song, representing those who come to worship in the High Holy Days.

Pastor: Jesus believes with Isaiah that all are welcome, including foreigners, the disabled, children and women. "Who shall approach?" call out the guardians of the temple. "Those God invites!" we can reply. Please join us now in an antiphonal reading of today's Psalm by speaking the people's part as you will see it appear on the screen.

KIM: Be gracious to me, O God, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.

People: For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.

KIM: I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

People: I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

KIM: For I hear the whispering of many —
terror all around! —
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

People: My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand
of my enemies and persecutors.

KIM: Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

Pastor: And from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 50, verses 4-9a...

KIM: Exalted YHWH has given me a skilled and well-trained tongue, so that I can sustain the weary with a timely word.
God awakens me morning after morning—wakens my ear, to listen like a student. Exalted YHWH opened my ears and I have obeyed, I did not turn away.
I offered my back to those beating me, offered my cheeks to those who would humiliate me.
I did not hide my face from insults or spitting.
Because Exalted YHWH helps me, insults cannot wound me, for I have set my face like flint, because I know I will not be put to shame.
My vindicator is at my side.
Who would dare accuse me?
Let us confront each other! Who are my adversaries? Let them accuse me!
It is Exalted YHWH who helps me. Who will judge me guilty?

REFLECTIONS: *The Passion and the Praise, A Profound Paradox*

- PASTOR: Have you heard the good news? Do you know what's about to happen?
- KIM: I see lots of people with branches in their hands and there are swatches of brightly colored fabrics being waved. But I am not sure what it's all about.
- PASTOR: Jesus is coming! Isn't that great?
- KIM: Well, sure, it's great! But I still don't get it.
- PASTOR: For so long the people have prayed for one who would release them from bondage. This is the person who can do it. He's parading into Jerusalem. He will take over!
- KIM: You're sure about that? He looks pretty mild to me.
- PASTOR: Believe me, he's not mild. He has done miraculous things. People who were blind can see, and people who were deaf can hear, because he healed them. He even walked on water. What do you think of that?
- KIM: I'm not sure. I expected that the one who would come would take over Jerusalem would be clothed in armor with an army which could defeat the enemy. I expected that there would be loud blaring trumpets, not a raggedy group of people waving branches.
- PASTOR: Listen! All I know is there's a parade, and I'm joining in. I want to celebrate!
- KIM: I'll watch for a while. Maybe I'll join in or maybe I'll just watch. I'm not making any commitments until I know what's going to happen. I want to be on the right side.

Pastor continues:

But what is the right side? For some it would be release from the oppressor, but oppression comes in many forms, in many guises. We can't always so easily identify the core of the problem. Sometimes our expectations and the reality don't equal each other. Sometimes we have to trust God to do what is right. Maybe the Christ will change our lives in a new and different way. Maybe the way of peace will be found. Perhaps for today, the parade will be sufficient.

In today's beautiful scripture from Isaiah, we hear the prophet of long ago speaking a prophetic and poetic message that will unfold far in the future as the Christ enters our world and our consciousness and prods us once again to be awakened as the prophet was... "morning by morning, awakening our ears to listen as those who are taught."

In both our scriptures from the Hebrew testament we are reminded again at how so much of our human lives are spent in the suffering and pain inherent in this worldly existence. "I have passed out of mind like one who is dead," the Psalmist mournfully sings. "I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many...as they scheme together against me as they plot to take my life."

And Isaiah reflects the same "happy" refrain..."I offered my back to those beating me, offered my cheeks to those who would humiliate me. I did not hide my face from insults or spitting."

These are not the sounds of laughter and the joys we wish to hear and experience in our lives; these words are not written by those who dwell in happiness and experience pleasure every minute of their lives. These are the words of those who know what it is to be human and to hurt. These are the words of those who know what it is to experience the violent vicissitudes of this earthly existence in a very visceral way. They know what it means to be bullied and ostracized. They know how it feels to experience the pain of misery as "my eye wastes away from grief [and] my soul and body also."

AND it is into this place and these feelings that the Christ appears. Here is God willingly taking on human form, knowing with certainty what is to befall that form, to show us the truest love, to let Her face shine upon His servant and save us in God's steadfast love.

As we enter the city today joyfully waving our palm branches and celebrating the one who delivers us from our bondage, we are reminded that the pain and the sorrow and the sacrifice are right around the corner. This profound paradox of passion and praise is not cause for defeat, however, but a call to victory.

"Because Exalted YHWH helps me, insults cannot wound me, for I have set my face like flint, because I know I will not be put to shame."

Our Christ, like the prophet Isaiah before Him, show us through His very life and the journey he takes with us that whatever befalls us in life God, our exalted Yahweh, is with us.

Those dealing with constant illness, those mourning sudden and inexplicable loss, those beset by enemies who would persecute and despise them, all of us going through our daily lives with problems both petty and profound, can be assured that God is with us, that God loves us and that God never abandons us.

That is how we can celebrate Palm Sunday at the same time we experience Passion Sunday. God is in it all and through it all. Hosanna!

As a response to the word reflected upon this day, I invite you to share in an affirmation with me for this Palm/Passion Sunday called "Twenty Centuries Past" by J. Young and adapted by Rev. Rex Hunt and just a bit by yours truly.

As I read, I will invite you to respond with these words, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Hosanna in the highest."

Twenty centuries past, what city has not heard of your coming? From Beijing to Berlin, from Jerusalem to Johannesburg, from New York to New Delhi surely the word has spread that you've come in peace, not violence to enrich, renew, transform our lives and bring us to shalom?

All Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Hosanna in the highest.

Twenty centuries past, what city has not heard of your church? From Catholic, Orthodox, Uniting or Anglican, Evangelical, Progressive or Pentecostal surely the message of acceptance, healing, and confidence in your royal advent, has been passed on through faithful living?

All Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Hosanna in the highest.

Twenty centuries past, what city has not rejected you? From penthouse to tenement, from factory to shopping mall, from theme park to concert hall, surely the news is that this life is for taking, not giving and what stands in the way of this lifestyle must now be removed?

All Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Hosanna in the highest.

Twenty centuries past, what city does the Christ seek to enter? From leafy suburb to skid row, from gated community to downtown loft, surely the sign of the church free from pride, united in deed, must be the welcome the Christ longs for as he enters our city?

All Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Hosanna in the highest.

Let us pray... God, who cares for us,

The wonder of whose presence fills us with awe.

Let kindness, justice and love shine in our world.

Let your secrets be known here as they are in heaven. Give us the food and the hope we need for today.
Forgive us our wrongdoing as we forgive the wrongs done to us.

Protect us from pride and from despair and from the fear and hate which can swallow us up.

In you is truth, meaning, glory and power,
while worlds and centuries come and go. Amen.