

Palm Sunday begins what Christians call "Holy Week." Holy Week is a confusing time, for it starts out with Jesus being heralded by crowds of excited people as he makes his way into Jerusalem, and ends with excited folks demanding that he be crucified ... The week has been preached on from every angle: the fickleness of humanity, the misunderstanding of the people - especially Judas, the self-sacrifice of Jesus as he let himself be killed. Each approach has its merit. There's another aspect about this week, and that is the confusion of it all. Folks back in Jesus' day were confused by him, just as folks in our day are confused by what was really going on in Holy Week.

Surely the people did not understand. They were hoping for a king of strength, like David, who would end the hundreds of years of foreign occupation Israel had been suffering. They yearned for a political deliverer who could kick the Romans out and restore the prestige of the Jewish nation. This Jesus seemed to be their best hope. He was from Bethlehem, David's city, and of David's lineage. He was able to work miracles, feeding thousands and healing dread diseases. So he became a prime candidate for Messiah, the One they believed God would send to overpower the oppressors. (pause)

These days we are also in the midst of confusion. Life is a power struggle. We struggle to have power over illness; we struggle to have power in our jobs, if we have jobs; we struggle to have power in our relationships; we struggle to have power over TIME and aging, and the fast-moving advances of technology!

A man spoke about the challenges of his life: "I awoke early and tried to pray. I could find all sorts of images, all sorts of words to describe the confusion of MY life, the things that threaten me or that I find overwhelming, the things I cannot handle... But I could not hear anything like GOD's voice or God's word in the midst of my own confusion. My wife has been battling MS for three years, our twenty year old son has just been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and my boss just told me that he is selling the business to a company based in Texas. My world seems to be falling apart, and I am filled with uncertainty about almost everything."

Our world is also scary and confusing. How could that co-pilot have been so desperate that he would kill not only himself but also 149 innocent people in that crash? In all the struggles going on in the Middle East, how can we work with Iran but also work with Saudi Arabia while they work against each other? And who are Hutis and the Sunnis and all these other players stepping into the ring, supposedly because of the threat of ISIS?

In the very midst of our life struggles or confusions, God offers us Holy Week. Throughout the Bible, God has told his people, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (From Isaiah 41:10) This week, we see through the lens of Jesus what God's power, love, and victory look like. We see Jesus live out what he warned his followers about: "Whosoever would gain his life will lose it..." (Matthew 10:39 and 16:25, Luke 9:24 and 17:33)

Holy week is holy because in the midst of its confusion and misunderstood events there is revealed the secret of true strength and life: "In order to gain life one must be willing to lay it down for another." Jesus taught this truth, and during Holy Week we witness how Jesus lived out this truth for our sakes, that we may better understand the potential of our own lives and the strength of God's love

for us.

In his book, *The Jewish Way*, Rabbi Irving Greenberg shares a story from the Midrash: "A city revolted against its ruler. The King set forth to subdue and punish it, and the city hastened to request a pardon. At a distance from the city, the elders and great ones came to the King and begged forgiveness. 'For your sake,' the King said, 'I forgive one-half of the guilt.' At the gates of the city, the masses turned out and pleaded for mercy. 'For your sake,' the King said, 'I forgive half the guilt that is left.' When the King entered the city and found all the little children gathered with song and dance and joy to appear before him, he exclaimed, 'For your sake, I forgive everything!'" For our sake, **Jesus**. God sent his Son... John 3:16

True strength versus weakness. Here's the difference: When we try to become strong by building ourselves up, we finally lose. But when we allow ourselves to become weak for the sake of another, trusting that this is what our Lord has asked us to do, we become strong in the sense of God's strength.

We know what happened that week long ago, and what didn't happen. Jesus went through the week meekly, gently, accepting all manner of abuse by the authorities and all manner of deficiency on the part of his disciples. There was no undeniable display of power. There was no avoidance of the horrid aspects of crucifixion. The man the crowd had claimed to be their king went meekly to his own execution. Judas and the others were filled with disappointment and failure as Jesus refused to use power in the way of the world, the way they thought he ought to.

We know how it all ended, of course, and that there was victory accomplished by the King of Kings that week. But in the midst of its confusion, Palm/Passion Sunday gives us opportunity to strip away our own infatuation with victorious endings and our own tendencies to scavenge only for ourselves in life, so that we can receive the most important message of this season: GOD so Loves the world, that at *great cost* the Lord of Life laid down his own life, so that death and human destructiveness might be overcome through the obedience and self-giving love of one man, Jesus. In the midst of a society of force and greed for power, this King chose to reach for a greater strength by becoming what the world too often calls weak: love and forgiveness.

For our 2015 world, hooked on quick resolutions and instant success and soured by empty promises and false expectations, the Savior holds forth a difficult challenge: "Follow me. But remember, my way leads through a cross. Nothing will be easy. Nothing will be magical. Perhaps nothing will appear to be successful." (pause) No empty promises. The way of this King is the way of life that fills us as we dare to empty ourselves; that surprises us with joy and meaning, and that assures us that God really is with us, never forsaking us, through our every decision, action, doubt and even death.

The King entered Jerusalem that Palm Sunday long ago. Today we hold our palm branches, branches that long ago spoke of Israel's coming VICTORY. But this week's victory is never victory of one people over another. It is victory *for* another. It is victory of life over death, of love over hate, of possibility over human failure, of God's straight path strong even in the midst of the kind of human confusion that can shout both praise and condemnation in a single week. GOD's way is given for us, to heal us and to make us new. May we receive this King of Kings into our lives today and throughout this Holy Week. May we dare to become weak enough to be strong for the sake of others; that this week our lives may be HOLY unto God. Amen.

