

Palm Sunday, Year A
2024

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God was there.
Ballenger

The Rev. Barbara

Were you there? This is the big musical question that we ask on Palm Sunday and all throughout Holy Week. Were you there? Our Holy Week services reenact these moments of Jesus' life like no others, except maybe the Christmas Pageant. By the end, it does feel like a fair question.

Were you there when he rode triumphantly into the city? Were you there when that woman anointed him with costly oil? When he had his final meal with his followers? When he washed their feet? Were you there when he was alone in the garden and his friends fell asleep? Where you there when he was betrayed? Arrested? Denied? Condemned? Beaten and tortured?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Today I want to remind us that God was there as well. Perhaps that goes without saying, but I sometimes wonder if we consider where God was during Holy Week. Do we remember that these painful things happened to God because they happened to Jesus? Jesus was there – in Jerusalem under Roman Empire in the first century of the common era, because this is how close God was and is to us, his children. In our skin. In our experience – the very worst of it -- God was there because we are here.

On Palm Sunday we remember the highs and lows of the story of Jesus' life with us – from the pinnacle of his success, the height of his reputation, escorted like a King into Jerusalem – to the depth of his defeat on the cross a week later – the mockery, the abandonment, the terrifying isolation. And in this tightrope walk of a story every painful moment happened to God.

The Holy Week stories of how God was there with Jesus might help us to understand how God is there with us in our passions – our highest highs and lowest lows, our most painful walks. In Jesus, God is not a bystander, or a witness or a comforting presence. God felt every blow, every rejection, every nail. God's entry into our humanity means that God doesn't leave us, any of us. God feels everything.

That's something to remember when we find ourselves crying out with Jesus and the psalmist " My God my God why have you abandoned me?" When we find ourselves asking God: Were you there? That too is a fair question.

Were you there, God? Were you there when I was rejected by friends, or taunted by bullies? Were you there when I didn't make the grades everyone expected me to? Were you there when I was so anxious or depressed I couldn't get out of bed? Were you there when my spouse, or my friend, or I myself got that diagnosis? Were you there when they died? Were you there in my addictions? Were you there when I lost my job, when I couldn't pay the bills? Were you there when I had to come asking the church for help paying for a hotel room so my kids wouldn't have to sleep in my car? Were you there when I ran out of food?

Were you there, when I was crucified, my Lord?

And God's answer is: Yes. I felt every blow.

I believe that because God was there in Jesus' humanity, God get us in ours.

When we are feeling our best, riding the triumph, experiencing the joy, God gets us.

When we are alone and in doubt, or in pain, or in shame or guilt God gets us.

We had our young people help tell the story of the Passion today because Holy Week is about them and their their sufferings as well. God gets them too.

At any age, that can be a little hard to believe. I wonder if we doubt that God is there with us because God doesn't seem to behave like we think a god should.

I say this because we often treat God as a long- distant miracle dispenser. If we only ask the right way, or behave just so, or have just the right set of ideas about God, then God will give us a life that escapes the cross, that jumps right over the potential Good Fridays and lands us nicely on Easter Sunday. We might be a little disappointed that God isn't like that. I think that's one of the things people hold against God.

On Palm Sunday we follow the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the story of his passion so we don't miss Good Friday. So we don't skip Holy Week, even if we can't make it to all the services. We don't skip over the passion because God didn't skip over it – but went through every painful step of it in Jesus. God was there. And In the same way God doesn't skip over the Good Fridays in our lives as well.

God's insistence on being there with us invites us to believe that God's love will outlast the pain that we are in, the losses we face. God's presence will outlast the bitterest of ends. God vows to stay with us until the pain is gone and all that's left is a choice – to remain with God as God remains with us. Or not.

God doesn't force us into the shared life that God offers at the end of this Holy Week. That's up to us. Easter is an offer. And it comes from a God who has chosen to know us from the inside out.

So during Holy Week when we see the divine Jesus at his human worst, we have to ask ourselves if we want to be with a God who finds us where we are, who makes human pain Divine pain, who endures it with us. Do we want to be with a God who gets us? This Holy Week we are invited to be there with God on the walk to Easter and to answer God's ultimate question of us: will you stay?

Amen.