

March 20, 2016



## **“Streams of Mercy: A Wideness in God's Mercy”**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Luke 23:32-43*

*Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

With Palm Sunday, Holy Week begins--the week we walk with Jesus through all the events which lead up to his eventual betrayal and arrest and crucifixion and on to that astonishing, earth-shattering, life-changing, tomb-opening Easter morn. Holy Week begins today.

Palm Sunday is about Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, hailed as a King by crowds thronging the roads and waving branches to greet him as they would any royalty, though I assure you, these folks hadn't seen any real royalty go by for a very long time. But they knew what to do when the moment came. Thousands of them, we imagine, whooping and hollering, throwing their caps into the air and their cloaks along the ground, madly waving those branches to salute their King. Palm branches—symbols of goodness and victory in ancient times. A sign of triumphant rejoicing.

“Hosanna! Hosanna!” They cried, which means: “Save, we pray!” People bursting with joy and relief, with a sense of tremendous expectation and fulfillment. What a day! Save us, good King. Save us, and set us free. Hosanna!

And save he will, with mercy and love. Save he will, but only after gathering with them for prayer and a holy last supper. Only after washing their feet. Only after arrest, trial, crucifixion. Only after abiding in the deepest darkness of the tomb. Save he will, but not like any other king they had or ever would know. For he is the Christ, who reveals his power above all in mercy and forgiveness, and opens for us all the treasures of God's mercy. Hosanna! Save us and set us free!

This is our God whose name is mercy, as Pope Francis has written, who “welcomes, embraces, and transfigures evil into good, transforming and redeeming [our] sin, transmuting condemnation into salvation.”

Nowhere do we see it more clearly than in the events and interactions of this Holy Week, especially in the scene of the crucifixion itself which Krista just read for us. Condemned to death by the most horrible means. Dying alongside two criminals—murderers? Robbers? Insurgents? Yet even these are not outside the scope of his compassion and mercy. “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

How could Jesus possibly endure this, let alone extend compassion to those at his side? Only by his trust in God's mercy and fidelity, so complete that, at the moment of his death, he commends his life to God.

These same streams of mercy have carried us through the Lenten season. God's mercy for us, each and every one. God's “unfair” mercy for those who, by our earthly standards, don't seem to merit it. God's extravagant mercy flowing out through us to the least and the lost, the hungry and the homeless. This mercy, as we have seen and felt, is deep and wide. It is a holy medicine, a balm for our sin-sick souls and our broken hearts. It changes us from the inside out and sets us free to offer that same love to everyone we meet. “There's a wideness in God's mercy,” the old hymn goes, “like the wideness of the sea; there's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty. There is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good!”

We are especially grateful this morning, as a congregation, for the opportunity to stand with Karen and Susan in their commitment to the baptismal covenant. Every baptism is special, and believe me, April will bring the baptism of some really precious little babies, and we will rejoice to share in the joy of their families and friends.

Adult baptism offers a different kind of gift to the whole community. In the United Methodist Church, we baptize at any age. In the case of infants, we acknowledge God's love for them and we ask parents to pledge to raise their child in the Christian faith. When a youth or an adult seeks baptism, we also acknowledge God's love for them and we also see and hear their own commitment to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We know that in their hearts, they have recognized their

own need of God's love and mercy. They are asking for that oasis of mercy to wash over them in the waters of the font. And they are asking for the love and prayers of this community to lift them up and support them and walk this path with them, this journey of love and forgiveness and mercy.

Karen and Sue, we pledge you our love and support this day. For we all know that along with the happiness and joy of this special day, there will come times of trial and temptation, as there were for our Lord, Christ Jesus. In addition to the joy of worship, and study, and the loving fellowship of this community, there will come times when God seems far off or when the things life throws at us seem all most too much to bear, as there were for our Savior, Christ Jesus.

And that's precisely why we share this sacrament within the context of worship, when we are all gathered together as the visible Body of Christ, the beloved community of love and mercy. For we all know our need of God. And we all know our need of one another. We are disciples together, those being formed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the people of God. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One with Christ. One with each other. And one in ministry to all the world.

It's a great day to rejoice with you and in our hearts, each and every one, to renew our own baptismal vows, for with you, we believe baptism to be an outward and visible sign of the grace of Jesus Christ. It is through this mercy that we enter into a special relationship with Christ and are inheritors of the promise of eternal life.

With you, we will join that mighty procession alongside the dusty road into Jerusalem. We will throw down our coats to herald his approach and wave our palms high in praise and jubilation, crying "Hosanna! Come, and save us!"

And then I invite us to take our palms home and put them in a jar or vase as a visible reminder through this week of all that is to come and all that is yet to be. Christians around the world have adopted a variety of customs using the palms. Italians traditionally offer them as signs of reconciliation and peace to those with whom they have quarreled or become estranged. Farmers in Slavic countries place them out in the fields, asking God's blessing on their crops and harvest. Sometimes they are placed on the door frame so that with each going out and coming in, we are reminded of our allegiance to Christ. And of course, we save some here, to be burned to make ashes for next year's Ash Wednesday service, when we will again be called to repentance and reminded of the mercy of God.

May these palms be a blessing to you, a reminder of the wideness of God's mercy, of God's presence with us each day, and of the streams of mercy always flowing from the heart of our God.

So, let us shout Hosanna! Come, great God of mercy. Save us. Wash us. Heal us. Bind us to one another and to you. Raise us up, even now, and make us fit for life eternal.

Notes:

Pope Francis: Misericordiae Vultus. Jubilee of Mercy: Merciful Like the Father.

Pope Francis. The Name of God is Mercy. New York: Random House, 2016.

Frederick W. Faber, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," 1854. UMH #121