

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

April 14, 2019

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

Luke 23:1-49

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

This morning, I thought it quite appropriate (but maybe a little unorthodox) to begin our Palm Sunday with a cheer. Some of you surely know it. It goes like this...Let's go Wahoos. (clap, clap, clapclapclap). It seems to me that I heard something about UVA winning a national title this week. Now...I must admit to you now – I don't follow UVA sports but I know what this moment feels like for you tried and true Hoos. Because if you know me, you know I am a huge Clemson Tigers fan and it was only a few months ago that Clemson walked away with their second national title in 3 years.

What's really amazing to me is that these two school have something in common...they each have coaches who believe in teaching their players that life isn't just about winning. It's about how we work hard, how we believe in something greater than ourselves, how we gain strength through our adversity, and how we remain grateful for the gifts we have received.

Both Dabo Sweeney and Tony Bennett have built their teams on faith. On understanding how to be a person of integrity when the odds aren't in your favor and how to be a person of humility when you rise above those odds. They have been vocal about their Christian faith and they have taught their teams that there is always something to be gained within the hills and the valleys of life.

The lesson is so strong at UVA that in the basketball locker room, Coach Bennett has posted 5 guiding pillars on the wall. 5 pillars that are derived from his faith and that build his team in mind, body, and spirit. They are humility, passion, unity, servanthood, and thankfulness. In essence, these are the qualities that remind the UVA players that there is holiness in both the joy and the pain, in the disappointment and the celebration. But to find that holiness, you have to be ready to walk the journey – whatever it may bring – win or lose.

So as unlikely as it may seem, there is really no better way for us to enter into our Palm Sunday together than with a little Wahoo spirit to guide us along the way.

We began our service this morning with Jesus on a dirt road. Embarking on an unlikely journey to Jerusalem. A journey that will lead down some very dark paths of pain and suffering. Into uncertain and terrifying circumstances. Yet, Jesus begins down this dirt road. I imagine him a bit uncertain but at the same time willing. Confident yet cautious. But above all, faithful.

There are two things that stand out to me. The first is that Jesus can't be sure exactly what he will encounter on this road, what trials he will endure, what emotions will plague his heart. But we know he has a faithful heart as he enters the valley of the week to come.

The second thing is that the people around him try to make something of this dusty road he is on. They lay down their cloaks. They lay down palm branches. They begin to honor this old, well-worn path with all that they had because they knew the road was somehow holy. In humble, grateful gestures, they claimed Jesus' valley. And they began walking together.

And I want you to remember that in this moment, no one really knew the outcome. No one could comprehend the devastation that would soon play out, the darkness and defeat that would soon overtake them. And certainly, no one at this point in time knew the promise of the resurrection and the joy that would follow.

Frederick Buechner states it perfectly when he says that despair and hope travel together to Jerusalem down that dirt road and into the valley. Both are true. Both are reality. Both are holy.

It brings home to me that we have all at one time or another entered into a valley, not knowing when the hill would come, not knowing when or if we would be able to look back over the terrain we have traveled from a better vantage point. We have all found ourselves in places of despair only to wonder if we would ever be able to hope again. We have all felt pain and yearned for joy.

This is the story of Palm Sunday. The story of the dusty road. A dusty road that leads into a very deep valley. And the hill was just out of sight.

Before the championship game between UVA and Texas Tech, Coach Bennett played a song for his team called *Hills and Valleys* by the Christian artist, Tauren Wells. It was a powerful reminder to the team that no matter where they have been, no matter what they may face, that God was going to carry them through it all. And in the end, whatever happens, their job was to stay humble, to work together, to maintain a servant's heart and to be thankful for what they have been given.

Some of the words to the song go like this...

*I've walked among the shadows
You wiped my tears away
And I've felt the pain of heartbreak
And I've seen the brighter days
And I've prayed prayers to heaven from my lowest place*

*No matter what I have, Your grace is enough
No matter where I am, I'm standing in Your love
On the mountains, I will bow my life
To the one who set me there
In the valley, I will lift my eyes to the one who sees me there
When I'm standing on the mountain aft, didn't get there on my own*

When I'm walking through the valley end, no I am not alone!

*I've watched my dreams get broken
In you I hope again!
Every joy and every pain
Through it all you will remain
You're God of the hills and valleys!
And I am not alone!*

This song is such a beautiful and powerful reminder that this road we are on is holy. And if you remember nothing else from my sermon this morning, I want you to remember this...

God is not just the God of our success. God is also the God of our struggles. In our highs and in our lows, God is with us. In moments of pain and disappointment and joy and celebration, God is with us. On the hill we remain humble, in gratitude for the strength we have been given and in the valley we stand tall because we believe that within our adversity we are never alone.

Like Jesus, we enter not knowing where the dusty road will lead but we enter any way trusting that God is with us and that God is creating something extraordinary out of the journey. Amen.