***Were You There?***

Luke 23:26-43, Mark 10:42-45

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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Today, our children and the choir sang “Hosanna!” while waving palm branches in the air because today is Palm Sunday, after all, and we are remembering that on the first Palm Sunday nearly 2000 years ago, Jerusalem’s citizens tried to crown Jesus and make him king. Jesus accepted the honor (more or less, sort of). However, instead of riding on a war horse to Pilate’s palace, to throw the occupying Roman army out, which was expected, Jesus rode an ass to the temple, instead. Then he looked around and went home. So, from the very beginning, *King* Jesus was a disappointment, a bit of a joke, fake news.

Five days later, on Good Friday, this same Jesus is hanging from a cross wearing a crown of thorns as a punch line. A sign above Jesus’ head, put there by the Romans, riffs on what is by now a tired old joke. The sign says, “King of the Jews.” Ha, ha. Very funny. Tell us another one.

Nevertheless, a crowd gathers round King Jesus’ wooden throne. He holds court. See who comes.

Two courtiers, renowned crooks, are at King Jesus’ sides. One despises King Jesus and the other feels sorry for King Jesus, but both of them, hamstrung, can do nothing for their King, now, but hang onto his every word.

See who comes before King Jesus' throne. Soldiers who refuse to pledge him allegiance. As King Jesus bleeds, they drink and laugh and play at dice at his feet. The soldiers believe in Lord Caesar, in enemy occupation, and in violence. The soldiers are not interested in the sacrificial grammar of nails and thorns.

See who comes before King Jesus' throne. The whole religious establishment—Presbytery, Council, Conference, all the chief poohbahs and preachers, interpreters of canon law and promulgators of church regulation. And they are pleased to stand at Jesus’ throne. You see, the tables that belonged to the thieves in the temple have been restored and temple services can again proceed as scheduled. The religious establishment does not pray for Jesus’ kingdom to come, but pray for the status quo.

See who comes before King Jesus’ throne. Surprise! Some women. Mary and Mary and Salome and other rich women who made up Jesus’ royal court. Luke says of them, "Jesus traveled about from one village to another . . . the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from who seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna, and many others. These women were helping to support [Jesus and his disciples] out of their own means." On Good Friday, these rich women—the only disciples not to abandon Jesus—are learning that there are some things money can’t buy.

Well, and see who does not come before King Jesus' throne. Most of those who sat at his right and his left at supper a few days before Palm Sunday are nowhere to be seen on Good Friday. At mealtime, each harbored secret hopes: Peter wanted to be the press secretary, James the chief of staff, and Judas the Secretary of Treasury. But after the arrest, like the crowd after a parade, the disciples are swallowed up by the city and disappear. Well, at least King Jesus now knew who his real friends were.

How strange. King Jesus’ realm is an upside-down kingdom, where crooks become courtiers, where soldiers and priests who know not what they do are, says Luke, nevertheless forgiven, where cowardly disciples who despise and reject Jesus, are promoted to apostle; an upside-down realm where women are the only live last-action heroes, though all they can do is weep.

That’s how it is with Jesus. King of an upside-down realm where, as the Apostle Paul would later describe it, we proclaim Jesus Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but for us, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For,” says Paul, “God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Today is Palm Sunday, but Good Friday is coming. And what I want to say, this morning, is that it doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter whether you are a soldier or a disciple or a priest or a woman. It doesn’t matter whether you are nice or naughty, whether you are a Ford supporter or prefer a Chevy, whether you are a Jew or a gentile, man or woman, whether you are gay or trans or straight, whether you are living with your lover or headed for a monastery; whether you are proud of your accomplishments or embarrassed by the lack of them; whether you are a political refugee or economic migrant; it doesn’t matter whether you are young or old, rich or poor, black or pink, struggling with secrets you hardly dare face or struggling with health that is in decline, the message of the gospel, and the message of our communion today is that you are welcome to come to Jesus; you are welcome to have the last laugh at the bad joke of his kingship; you are welcome to join us and as we honor the one who showed us that in his kingdom all are welcome.

Because here we practice divine hospitality.

Welcome.