

“THE TRUTH OF HOSANNAS”

Mark 21:1-11

Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Some people would tell you that there are only two constants in life: death and taxes. For most of us, I would add a third constant: the grocery store. No matter what else is going on in your life, there are people to feed, meals to be prepared. And so, off you go to the Safeway, or Richey's, or Winco, or the Co-op, or, in Seattle, to the QFC.

In the first days after Jessie was diagnosed with some kind of malignant tumor on her head, I would find myself wandering the supermarket aisles, looking at the people around me, thinking, “These people are all going about their ordinary lives doing ordinary things, and here I am, somehow separate from them all, because even though I look the same on the outside, inside it feels like my entire world has collapsed.” I don't know when in the days or weeks after that, my perception changed. Going grocery shopping is still a somewhat surreal experience for me, an act of normalcy at a time when life seems anything but normal. But now I look around me and wonder, “All these people walking around, looking normal, I wonder how many of them are preoccupied with some problem or another in their lives. Is the distracted woman in the check out line ahead of me worried about her marriage? The man, closely examining one grapefruit after another before choosing one, as if something of great weight depends upon this choice: is he worried about his job, or his teen-age son, or that his recent routine physical revealed prostate cancer.” What would it be like, going to the grocery store, if all of us wore externally what we are feeling internally. How many of us would wear, stamped on our foreheads, “Fragile. Handle with care” for one reason or another.

So you may be wondering about now what my philosophical grocery shopping musings have to do with Palm Sunday! Well, the connection is this: for the past two weeks, while reading the Palm Sunday gospel, I have found myself focused on the people who lined the road coming into Jerusalem. Who was there and why were they there? What was going on in their lives that brought them to stand for hours in the midday sun to catch a glimpse of the controversial young rabbi heading into town. For a few, it was most likely an innocuous intellectual or spiritual curiosity. They came out to the parade much as one of us would go to Grass Roots bookstore to pick up a new, well-publicized thought-provoking book. Others, I am sure, had received word of Jesus' reputation as a healer. They, or someone they loved, was ill, and they came to the road in the fervent hope that a look, a word, a touch from this great healer would cure them. Certainly, one faction of those who came that day were of the Jewish sect we now identify as Zealots, religious rabble rousers, those who sought rebellion, political change, a leader who would overthrow the power of Rome and the ruling Jewish elite. And then there were the seekers, the dreamers, the spiritually hungry: those facing the so-called normal crises of life who sought some sign, some witness, some something that would make real the presence of God in their lives.

The gospel writer lumps all these individuals together as “the crowd,” as if they were of singular

mind or purpose in their presence on the Jerusalem road that day, but like the patrons of the QFC on any given Saturday afternoon, each carried his or her own particular burdens and his or her own desire for the presence of the holy. One thing we do know that joined most of these watchers. They were of what Marcus Borg would call the peasant class, the great majority of the Judean population who lived barely at a subsistence level. For them, just eking out enough food, money, water for the day was a full-time occupation. They didn't have time for idle curiosity. Coming out to see Jesus meant that they were seriously seeking whatever it was each one looked for.

And finally he came, down the road sitting on a donkey surrounded by followers. And the crowd responded. "Hosanna!" they shouted. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

It has become theologically fashionable in recent years to view these cries of Hosanna with skepticism, to see them simply as ironic. We all know where the story goes from here. These same folks who shout their hymns of hosanna now will sing a different tune later in the week. Some will lose interest all together, their curiosity satisfied. Others will flee in fear. Yet others will betray Jesus for money, or out of anger, or just from crowd pressure, handing him over to the authorities and crying, Give us Barabbas, and Crucify him. The Hosannas of Palm Sunday are apprehended as flimsy, insubstantial, the partial celebration of those of partial faith. That's one of the reasons we feel so silly waving our palms on these Palm Sunday mornings, because we view the cry of hosanna as just a hollow prelude to Easter's alleluias.

And at one level that's true. But the deeper truth, I think, is that most of us who wish to be people of faith live at least much of our lives in the land of hosannas. To get to alleluia means to apprehend the fullness of God, the absolute immensity of God's love and power. And that's a stretch even for the most spiritually committed and disciplined among us. I remember once, several years ago, talking with a nun who had spent 30 years of her life in a contemplative order. She spoke candidly to me of her many crises of faith, of how she failed more often than she succeeded in thinking she perceived God whole. The conversation was first shocking, and then ultimately comforting to me. If this holy woman, who had for years spent every waking moment of every day practicing the presence of God, if she thought she failed more often than she succeeded, then maybe it was ok for me and the rest of us, we who live our religious commitment alongside of jobs, and personal problems, and trips to the grocery store, maybe it's ok for us to admit that there are days when God is merely an idea for us, and some days not a very good idea at that. We, most of us, are grateful just for hosannas: a partial glimpse, or a moment's comprehension, one morning of seeing God's glory pass by us riding a donkey into Jerusalem. It's truly a cause for celebration. No irony, just simple joy that for right now, we are there, and for right now, we believe whole-heartedly. Hosanna in the highest heaven, our hearts cry out, and though it may be days, or weeks, or longer until the next hosanna moment, for *this* moment our souls are fed and we stand open and grateful, waving our palms for the wonder of it.

As you all know, my life these past weeks has been bordered by uncertainty in many forms. But if I am certain of one thing, it is this: that God is not mocked by our hosannas. God does not count them ironic or insubstantial. God does not turn aside from us for our fragile or partial faith. Instead, time and time again, God keeps coming towards us, inviting us to join the parade, to catch our small glimpse of the holy. Whether we are happy, or distracted or despairing, whether we are driving a carpool, or working in the garden, sitting at the bedside of a loved one, or even in the QFC. God will still always keep coming towards us, and any time, any time we can raise our eyes and hearts from the noise and clamor of our lives and see, see God even for a moment, and know God and rejoice in that knowing, any time that happens, God will accept our waving palms and our shouts of hosanna and God will celebrate with us. Thanks be to God. Hosanna in the highest. Amen.