

Palm Sunday 2010 (March 28, 2010)
Denial, Defeat, or Discipleship – Your Choice

What's going on with Palm Sunday? In our services, we strive for a consistent theme. Every Sunday the liturgy, the music, the sermon, the vestments, the flow and pace of the service all work together for a common theme. But what a jarring disconnect we run into on Palm Sunday. The service began this morning in the parish hall, amidst laughter and light. We took our palms and we waved them as we marched and sang. It was a festive parade. All glory laud and honor to this victorious king. It was a joyful celebration. Then we run smack into this Passion Gospel that tells of danger, betrayal, abandonment, cowardice, torture, violence and suffering, injustice and death. It is hard to hear good news in this gospel this morning. The joy of the palm procession is forgotten. What is going on?

Palm Sunday jarringly brings us face to face with reality: the suffering and hurting in the world, and the reality of our own sin and death. This day challenges us to respond: how are we going to deal with the very real, difficult times of life, our failure, loss, sin, and death – and more importantly, how are we going to respond to Jesus, who came to deal with these very things? I see three options for dealing with adversity. We can deny that it exists. Or we can deal with adversity by being defeated by it. Or we can be a disciple of Jesus, and prevail over adversity. Denial, Defeat, Discipleship – three distinct ways of living. You are likely living one of these three ways today.

Denial. Keep the windows rolled up and the music up loud. Whistle a happy tune. In denial of the harsh reality of life's challenges – the pain and failure, the inevitability of death. Keep those things at arm's length. Nothing that a shopping trip to the mall or the latest episode of Survivor or American idol can't fix. And if something tough should come along in the future, hey, I can handle it.

The problem is: if we're going to make denial work for us, we cannot allow ourselves to acknowledge or think too much about things like poverty, addiction, war, abuse, or death – or the needs of others... and certainly not today's Gospel.

A denier may say that church is for wimps. Who needs it? Or the church-going denier may say that church is about going because it's the thing to do, part of what's expected of me, it's about feeling comfortable, part of the comfortable routine of a predictable unchallenging life – which is just what I want and need if denial is going to work for me ... for the denier, their real church may be the TV set or Best Buy or a million other diversions.

A denier will say that I don't need a savior because there's nothing I need to be saved from – let's have a parade and wave our palms, we love having a new leader like this victorious Jesus ... I mean, I can cheer him on while he's the man of the hour, but I don't want to think about this cross thing. Yes, the Palm Sunday procession has elements of denial in it ... celebrate Jesus as the conquering hero – see the limited possibilities, then we are shocked and shaken by what happens next, after we come into the church and confront this horror story of betrayal and murder and human failure and grief beyond measure.

Sadly, the denier cannot fully grasp Easter and resurrection because he cannot acknowledge Good Friday and the cross and death. Denial, that's one way to deal with life.

Another way to live is with **Defeat**. The defeated person is very aware of reality. Her head is not buried in the sand. She knows about failure and tragedy ... hasn't denied them, but instead has been crushed by them. She won't come to church because she feels unworthy – accepting the consequence that I have made my bed, now I must lie in it. Like one defeated woman who said to me: I would come to church, but I'm afraid I'd just sit there and cry. Defeated.

Whereas the denier will not take on an outreach effort because he or she is in denial that there is a problem, the defeated will not take on an outreach effort because he or she believes that it is hopeless, that nothing can be done or that their gifts are inadequate. The defeated also doesn't know about Easter, not because she cannot acknowledge Good Friday but because she can't get past it.

Jesus wants us to be neither deniers nor defeated. He wants us to be **Disciples**. Following him. The disciple does not deny or sugarcoat reality, is very aware of the tragedy and brokenness and need of the world. She is troubled by it. Thinks about it a lot. But she is not defeated by it. She knows that with God, all things are possible.

This week we concluded our Lenten study series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. We discussed chapter four this past Wednesday night, and we spent quite a bit of time on verse 4:13, which a number of folks agreed is one of their favorite verses in the Bible. Here is Paul, imprisoned hopelessly in chains in a Roman prison. He may be facing execution. But he writes to his friends at the church in Philippi: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" This is the rallying cry of a disciple, not a denier, not one who is defeated.

"I can do all things." Yes, there are things that need to be done, big things, scary things, hard things. Even dying. The disciple is not in denial of this. But I can do these things! I am not defeated by them, I am not cowering in the corner, or running away. I may be shaking in my boots, but, yes, I can do all things. ALL things. And I can do them because I do not do them out of my own power, but "through him who strengthens me."

In today's Passion gospel we heard the story of Jesus' death. But in the shadows of that story, we also heard about two men – one a denier, one a defeated man – both of whom became disciples. First, there's Peter, a denial specialist. Remember when Jesus asked the apostles, who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16) And Peter answers correctly, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus tells them that he would soon be betrayed and killed and then rise again. And Peter, the denier who could grasp the great procession of the palms on Palm Sunday but who could not grasp that ugly cross – rebuked Jesus and said, "God, forbid it." Peter was a denier.

Then later, on the night of his arrest, when Jesus tells his followers what was about to happen, again it is Peter the denier springing into action: "Oh, yes, Jesus, I'd follow you to death ..." all big talk and bluster, typical of a denier's unrealistic sense of self-sufficiency, but ultimately – when the chips were down -- Peter denied that he ever knew Jesus. The text says that when Peter heard the cock crow he remembered that Jesus had predicted his denial and he went out and wept bitterly. The denier became the defeated.

But Jesus won't leave you in that sorry state of being a denier or defeated. A few days later Jesus would reunite with Peter – and you'll have to wait until after Easter to hear the rest of this story – he would commission Peter as a true disciple, and send him out to "feed my sheep."

The Passion Gospel also has the story of a defeated man: the thief hanging on the cross next to Jesus. He's had a miserable life, and he concluded that he deserved the cross he was hanging on. ... I'm guessing he had turned to crime out of the crushing burden of life upon him ... seen no other alternatives ... not a time to go back to school and get that college degree... no hope ... he turned to robbery or worse ... His words today from the cross: "And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds." But then he does something amazing, something that turned his life – even in his last few minutes – from defeat into victory. He called out to Jesus. He became a disciple. Denial, defeat, discipleship. Not three equivalent options, because discipleship is the cure for denial and defeat.

We are called to choose discipleship – following Jesus -- as the way of living that lifts us out of denial, lifts us out of a life of defeat. We can do this because of God's initiative through Jesus ... and during this Holy Week, we see its culmination ... to save us. God through Jesus, lived with us, identified with us, called us friends, died WITH us – he was spared nothing, no denial here ... and died FOR us ... the once and for all answer for our denial and our defeats. And he rose again. The end of the story is victory.

He calls us to be his disciples – even if we have lived a life time of being a denier, as Peter had, of being defeated, as the thief had. Jesus says we can all do this now. We can do all things through him who strengthens us. What about you? We've come from the Palm Sunday procession, we marched and sang and waved our palms. And now we've been brought face to face with this story, the true story of Jesus. We can turn our heads away in denial – blot this out, think about those basketball games that'll be on this afternoon. Or we can be overwhelmed by this – defeated by this staggering tragic story of betrayal, abandonment, and suffering. Or we can look to God, as a disciple of Jesus, and say, "Thank you." Thank you for loving me so much that you would do this. Thank you for making it possible that I will never again have to be in denial about the reality of my life, thank you that I am not a person who has been defeated. Thank you, God, that through Jesus Christ I am a person of victory. Denial, defeat or discipleship? Your choice. Amen.