

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019.

Palm Sunday is one of the most interesting times of the Church Year. It is a collision of forces that makes for great drama.

- There are people hungry for the Messiah. From Matthew's gospel (**Matthew 21:1-11**): "This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Prophet, "Behold your king is coming to you."
- There are other people who want the whole Messiah expectation to go away. From **Psalms 22**: "Scorned by all and despised by the people."
- Then there is the One who just might be the Messiah, but perhaps isn't 100% sure. 99% percent, yes, but not 100%. Note the question marks in the Isaiah passage (**Isaiah 50:4-9a**): "Who will contend with me? Who are my adversaries? Who will declare me guilty?"

There is great risk involved for all three forces.

- What happens to the people hungry for the Messiah if Jesus isn't the One?
- What happens to the people who want the whole Messiah business to go away if indeed this Jesus is the One?
- And what happens to Jesus if the last three years of growing confidence are just a tease, not a reality? Yes indeed, great drama.

Now, let's add another force. There are people twenty centuries later who believe that this Jesus, three days after his crucifixion, rose from the dead, as confirmation of God's promise of a Messiah. What happens to these people – that would be you and I – if Jesus is not the Messiah? Their faith, our faith, is at risk.

Well, so be it. Risk is part of living. You and I have weighed the risk that Jesus might not be the One, but we're here, ready to welcome him as he enters

Jerusalem. We have our palms and we're ready to lay them down as a welcome mat. We're here despite the risk.

Check that. Maybe we're here because of the risk. Maybe risk-taking is actually better for us than no risk at all.

There is a part of us that wants to make sense of birth, life and death. We have lived long enough to know some things for sure and not to understand fully other things. We know ourselves pretty well, but not totally. We crave a means of gathering what we know and what we don't know and put it all in a spiritual backpack that we can wear with confidence. Journeys are always better with a well-stocked backpack.

There is also part of us that wants very much a fresh start. And not just one fresh start, but many. We recognize that we have not met our goals and perhaps the goals of those we love. We've done a lot of good things, but we've made some mistakes. We're both proud and not so proud. Sure would be nice if there was One who understood this human condition and said "It's okay. I can work with this. Give me a chance." A risk? Yes. But we'll take it, thank you very much. Better than relying on our own devices, which, while okay some of the time, are no substitute for Divine forgiveness which is wonderful all the time.

A third advantage of risk-taking is challenge. We like a challenge. We're built for a challenge. We've had enough success meeting challenges that we're not afraid of another one. Especially one that makes every day a blessing. Imagine not being able to say "Thank you, Lord, for this new day." There is no assurance, of course, that each new day will be successful, but at least we've had a shot at success, whatever that might mean. The gift of potential, of opportunity, of new experiences, even of old experiences revisited, of helping others, of offering our best. This is what each new day provides. The Philippians passage (**Philippians 2:5-11**) uses the verb "to grasp." That's what we get to do every day with which we are blessed.

There might be safety in no risk, but where is the joy? Yes, we accept the risk of faith, and we do so with thanksgiving.

Think of the forces converging on Palm Sunday. The people, the authorities, the would-be Messiah. The only one of the three who would have benefited from people dispersing and Jesus turning down the donkey would have been the authorities. From their standpoint, another collision avoided. But the calm wouldn't have lasted. The people's hope for a Messiah had been growing for many generations. And the self-awareness of Jesus as the Messiah had been growing as well. There were chances to turn back, both for the authorities and for Jesus. But both continued down their respective paths. Jesus was at peace with what he had to do. The authorities had a sense of responsibility, but certainly not of peace.

So, everything was in place. It was inevitable that things unfolded as they did. There were rough days ahead, especially in the week ahead. But, without the betrayal and arrest and trial and crucifixion that were to follow Palm Sunday, there would have been no resurrection. And without the resurrection there would have been no evidence that God's promise of the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

Yes, there was plenty of risk, enough to go around for all the parties in this drama. But, was the risk worth it? Not for the authorities.

But what about you and me? Well, we think so. That's why we're here this morning. That's why this next week is so meaningful for us. That's why we put our faith in our backpack. That's why Forgiveness is so comforting. And that's why we welcome the challenge of a belief in a Creator, a belief in the Creator's Son, and a belief in the Creator's on-going companionship through the Holy Spirit.

Palm Sunday. As a dramatic presentation, today is award worthy. As a pathway, today is part of a very satisfying spiritual journey. What's not to like about a backpack of faith, capital F Forgiveness, and a challenge, which if accepted and offered up, serves us and those we love very well, and even those whom we have trouble loving.

As with all our services, our response to this journey of faith is "Thanks be to God." Amen.

