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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
San Francisco, California
March 20, 2016
Palm/Passion Sunday

John 12:12-15; Matthew 27:11-54 (extracts)
“Wavering Palms”

It might seem strange that on this day of palms we read the stories of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem *and* the account of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. In the liturgical calendar, this day is no longer called Palm Sunday as it once was. It is now Passion/Palm Sunday. It is evident that “Palm” refers to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and “Passion” to his death.

The wider church has joined the two events because some people are not able to make the Good Friday service this week, which focuses more specifically on Jesus’ death. It’s an excellent service. Please attend if you can, here at 7 pm this Friday.

The best way to appreciate the resurrection, to journey from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, from hosannas to alleluias, is to travel through the crucifixion of Good Friday. To go with Jesus into his death enables us to appreciate life when it happens in Jesus’ resurrection. Death is not the final word.

The theme for today’s message is humanity’s fickleness and complicity in Jesus’ death. It is thought by scholars that the crowd that sang hosannas to greet their King and Messiah on the day, which the palms signify, was largely the same crowd that called for his crucifixion a few days later. The palms they waved when Jesus entered town soon wavered.

I remember going to the season opener of a professional baseball game. The crowds cheered when their home team ran onto the field. A well-known rock star sang the national anthem, which ended in fireworks. The spirit was upbeat and ebullient. Not long into the season the same supporting crowd booed their team because they were losing. I cannot understand why fans would boo their home team. Their palms wavered.

In a similar vein, an article I read recently recalls the reception US soldiers had when they returned to the US from their tours in Vietnam. The writer of the article states: “There were no orchestrated homecomings for veterans of the Vietnam War; the best that they could hope for was to be ignored.”

Whether we agreed with the war or not the least we could do was to welcome home those who served their country even if they did not understand the cause

of their going. Many, who cheered the soldiers going into the war, hissed and dissed them when they returned. Their palms wavered.

Jesus was in the same boat in his final week. People cheered him on Sunday and called for his crucifixion on Friday. In their eyes, Jesus was a winner at the beginning of the week but a loser near the end. They hissed and dissed him. Their palms wavered.

The story challenges followers of Christ to keep strong loyalties in their faith. It is easy to waver. Some of us have been practicing a Lenten discipline. In the practice, we are tempted to waver in our commitments. I admit that I was not perfect in my Lenten journey this year. When we commit ourselves to a Lenten discipline, we remember Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross. It provides a focus. It's a strengthening exercise.

Our failure to keep a Lenten commitment, however, would not kill Jesus. Other actions might. When we engage in destructive behaviors, we crucify Jesus. When we abuse others, and ourselves, we crucify the one who intends that all live whole and holy lives. When we abuse the earth, we crucify Jesus.

The best we can do as we cheer Jesus' presence and entry into our lives and communities is to go with Jesus into a life-affirming and justice-affirming faith, which for Jesus led to death at the hands of those who disagreed with his message. Therefore, we empathize with him in his time of struggle and death. As difficult as it is to walk with someone into death, we try not to waver.

There is an irony: Our affirmation and proclamation of life in a life-denying world can lead to death. It did for Jesus. Last week, we remembered the 13th anniversary of the courageous stand by Washington State student Rachel Corey. She stood before a bulldozer about to demolish a physician's house in the Gaza Strip. The bulldozer ran over her and killed her. In the land of Jesus' birth and ministry she stood for the rights of Palestinians, she affirmed their lives as Jesus did, and she paid the ultimate price. She went with Jesus into death.

We go with Jesus into his death by facing destructive, demeaning, negative, death-producing tendencies in the world and in ourselves. We sometimes find ourselves in the jaws of death. Passiontide rises on our shores. We struggle with the many issues in society, seek God's mind in it all, and do our best to make life-affirming decisions. We go with Jesus when we die to those things, which would prevent us from living with Jesus.

Let us travel the best we can with Jesus as he continues to affirm life and yet travels to his death this week. We can go with the fickleness of the crowd and affirm death and nothing but death or go with Jesus and affirm life. As we identify with Jesus, even to death, we prepare ourselves for the glory of next

Sunday. As we look at his death and face death-producing activities in ourselves and in the world, and do something for peace, justice and healing we will appreciate and share the new life that comes in the resurrection.

Next week we *will* experience this resurrection. We will know what it means to be alive. We will taste for ourselves and for the world the life that Jesus brought for all. Amen.