

**Sermon Preached
by Doug King
Palm/Passion Sunday
April 13, 2003
Mark 11:1-11, 14:10-15:47**

There is no way around it. There is no pleasant place to stand in the passion narrative. There is no perspective that brings one satisfaction. There is no character with whom we can relate and say we wish we were in their shoes. Although over the years many have tried to take the sting out of this tale. One such conceit that was popular in the Middle Ages was that Pilate and Judas knew each other. Thus in one Italian novel about Pilate, "Judas tells him: 'We are the indispensable artisans of the redemption. We are the instruments of the supreme outrage required to shake the moral conscience of the world...You will be execrated, but console yourself. He knows that he could never have redeemed humankind without my pretended betrayal and your pretended cowardice.'"

Well, that wraps it all up rather neatly doesn't it? I guess all of the players in this story were just doing what needed to be done so we could make sure that Jesus was murdered for our sins. The theological phrase "salvation history" represents our attempts at describing God's plan to put us in right relationship with our God, to bridge the gap between the Creator and the created. Theologians and biblical scholars look back over the biblical witness and attempt to map out God's plan. And of course whenever you look back upon something it is natural to view the events with an eye toward their inevitability. Well of course Jesus had to die on a cross for our sins, how else could we be saved?

I do not believe God's relationship with humanity has ever been that neat and tidy. Our pesky free will has left God with the need to improvise throughout history in an attempt to bring us safely into the loving arms of the divine. Jesus did not have to die on that cross for us to be reconciled with God.

It makes me wonder about the whole story. There are so many junctures in it where a turn one way or another could have avoided the horrific sight of this carpenter's son nailed to a cross. We could play out a tantalizing series of what ifs. What if Jesus decided to skip the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem this year? What if Judas wanders off into the night and decides to skip town rather than inform the chief priests about Jesus' whereabouts? What if the crowds decided to accept Pilate's offer to release Jesus?

There are so many places in the story where a different decision would have allowed Jesus to be preaching and teaching and laughing and healing this coming Friday rather than be abandoned and suffering on that cross. But you know what? It would not have mattered. If it did not happen in Jerusalem this time, than it would have been the next time or some other city at some other time. If Judas did not betray him, another would have. If the crowds did not turn against him now, they would have later. This is not because of some well-orchestrated plan executed smoothly by the divine.

It is the nature of things that when a relationship is broken, people are going to get hurt. When marriages fail, spouses get hurt. When friendships fail friends get hurt. When a rift occurs between parents and children there is more than enough hurt to go around.

As humans we are always failing God. It appears we just cannot help but use this grand gift of free will in less than virtuous ways in the course of our lives. We find ourselves being a little selfish here, a bit indifferent there, a tad spiteful on Tuesdays, and it all adds up to a broken-ness, broken-ness that binds us up from being the perfectly loving creatures we were created to be. And thus our relationship with God is broken.

God could choose to place all of the consequences of this broken relationship upon us. God could punish us and let us carry all of the pain for our failures. But, that is not our God's way. God has chosen to be the bearer of the pain and suffering for this failed relationship.

So when the Christ takes human form and lives among us bringing us the powerful message of the perfect loving we are called by God to embody in our lives, we are all bound to get a bit jumpy. At least those of us who tend to be a little less than perfect. And those in power especially do not like to have their imperfections pointed out to them. Sooner or later there is bound to be a showdown and a violent one at that. Now God could obviously choose to win this showdown and painfully put us in our place. But that is not the way of our God. Whenever and wherever the Son of God was going to be finally faced with the depth of our human sinfulness in violence, he was going to choose to take the pain and suffering himself rather than respond by invoking pain and suffering on humanity.

This week is all about God's choice to suffer for the broken-ness of our relationship on that cross in Jerusalem, and wherever and whenever we once again fail in being perfectly loving. And this decision makes all the difference in the world. It flips everything upside down. Where there should be recrimination, there is reconciliation. Where there should be condemnation there is consolation. Where there should be punishment there is promise, a promise that no matter what variable of what ifs occurs in the world, the result will be the same, God's undying undeniable love for us. Amen.