



What to preach on this day? It's a bit schizophrenic with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem to start and the crucifixion to end. Focus on joy or on death? We are really at a disadvantage because we know that Easter Day is coming. **We know** how the story ends.

But those living this story did not. In one short week they went from the very top of the mountain to the very valley of despair.

On this Palm Sunday we hear about Jesus entering Jerusalem seated on a colt – a modest, humble entry into the city where Jews believed God and heaven met. Coming from the north was Pilate, also entering the city as Roman Procurator determined to prevent an uprising. Pilate's entry was not on a donkey or a colt but rather with a show of military strength. If your purpose is to make sure there will be no riot, you want to make sure those you are sent to quiet know you have the force to back up your threats.

A feast day- the Passover- joy and celebration in remembering the exodus from Egypt, from tyranny under the Pharaoh to a journey that ends in the promised land. But it is also a day of terror – look at the Roman soldiers armed and ready to put down any uprising. How do you celebrate if you're afraid joyful shouts and gatherings might be taken as rebellion?

Fear is a controlling emotion – we withdraw from the threat to protect ourselves. It takes the joy out of life.¹

For some, the changes in security checkpoints at airports have meant they no longer travel by plane. Recently I've heard more than once comment about how flying isn't fun anymore. A moment of terror has forever changed how we move around. Or, as too often in the news, bombings and death in the middle east. Take your pick of location and type of terror: our world is not as safe as we wish it was.

Or perhaps its illness- sudden and unexpected- that turns our life around. The one who has always been the steady hand of the family now is frail and weak. The diagnosis is "there's nothing we can do." Why, God, you cry? Why **this** end to a life that has been spent loving and serving you?

¹ Lee H. Butler, Jr. on Ps. 31:9-16 in Feasting on the Word, Yr. C, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 166.

The Psalmist offers an alternative that Jesus lives out:

“But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’
My times are in your hand;
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
Let your face shine upon your servant;
Save me in your steadfast love.” (Ps. 31:9-16)

When we are in fear, when we face terror, what I want – and what I suspect most of us want – is to know that we are not alone. To know that someone cares for us, that someone walks with us through whatever nightmare we are facing.

Brian Doyle, who visited Wabash not too long ago, tells the story of Dawn and Mary. Two women caught in the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Rather than staying safely with others away from the shooting, they asked the others in the room with them to let them out – into the middle of the rampage- and then to close and lock the door behind them.

I imagine that they were terrified- but more than their own terror, more than their own fear – they were called to do what they could in that horrific situation. They hoped to confront the killer and convince him to stop. They put the safety of children and other adults before their own safety. While I do not know if they were Christians or whether they believed in God, I hope they died knowing they were loved and surrounded by the love of God at that most awful of moments.

Today marks the start of the walk through the valley of death for Jesus. Triumphant entry into Jerusalem, yes. But also a road filled with torture and death. Jesus knows the end even as those around him do not. Jesus also knows that his trust is in the Lord, his times are in the hands of his Father, and God’s face shines upon his faithful servant.

Jesus shows us the way to walk our times of terror and fear. Not to avoid them but to know that God will be present with us in his steadfast love. The saving love of God does not mean that we will not die. It **does mean** that we do not die alone. We die surrounded by God’s love.

And knowing that love cannot be broken or dissipated by what we humans do to one another, we can go forward into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey, ready to face the trials ahead.

Amen.