

Palm Sunday / Sunday of the Passion • March 20, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 23:1-56 (Deuteronomy 32:36-39)

“Vindicated”

Have you heard? There's a presidential election coming up! (And we've still got seven months to go!) What kind of a leader are you hoping to get?

I have an aversion to politics. I'm concerned when candidates feel that it's OK to launch their official campaigns as early as a year and a half before the big day. The amount of time and money that goes into a presidential campaign boggles the mind – especially when you factor in all of the unsuccessful campaigns that grind to a halt before reaching their goal. I've not really been impressed by any of the candidates that have come forward for the upcoming election, though I doubt any of them would really be concerned about that. Pastors aren't meant to be political spokespeople, and that's fine by me. The way campaigns have moved along this election year, I don't know if I'd be surprised if something happens that could make its way into a storyline on *House of Cards*.

It feels like we've had a much larger number of options than usual when you look at this cycle's round of presidential candidates. Some are career politicians. Others were newcomers who have never held an elected office. One attribute these men and women seem to share, though, is their ambition. Ambition, that drive to achieve and reach your goals, isn't a bad thing. But if those goals are bad ones – self-serving, short-sighted, or sinful – that's something that should cause us concern. The best president would be one whose character reflects self-giving ambition, a drive to serve and care for the nation they're being elected to lead.

What are people looking for in a president? Or – if we might look at it from a larger perspective – any good leader? Candidates up for an election tend to point their accomplishments as evidence for their qualifications for their desired position. That makes sense. After all, the specifics of what kind of leader you're hoping to get will depend on what that leader's supposed to do, or the kind of group they're being called in to lead; but people generally want a leader who can deliver, someone who can do what needs to be done. The proof of their capability, their merit, is in what's delivered.

What kind of a leader does Jesus appear to be? Our reading for Palm Sunday recounts Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the days ahead of the great Passover. The crowds hail him, shouting, “*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*” (Luke 19:38) Jesus looks like everything they'd been hoping to get in a leader and political liberator: he miraculously heals people, he miraculously feeds people, and he even teaches people about God! He rides into the city on a donkey, a sign that he enters in peace. They wave and lay down palm branches before him to welcome him in. But less than a week later, this same Jesus hangs beaten and bloodied on a cross. He suffered without complaint. He didn't stand up for himself. Even his closest friends deserted him when his enemies came for him. What kind of a leader is this? It really doesn't look like he can deliver, does it?

You might not be a leader. You've probably never ridden a donkey into a city as people hailed you with shouts of welcome. But have others ever judged you or measured your worth based on what you could deliver? Maybe it was grades, or goals, or dollars, or some other metric. What do your accomplishments – or lack thereof – have to say about you? Even if you perform at the highest level, though, you'll never be everything that other people are hoping to get. You'll never be able to meet every expectation.

God has high expectations for you and me both: perfection. So what can we do about that? If Jesus is the perfect and innocent Son of God, and he's beaten and executed, what about us who are legitimately guilty? How are we supposed to be justified before God? How can we hope to be in the clear? Who's going to vindicate us? Can Jesus' sacrifice really get the job done? How can we know that he's really the one who would deliver?

Look to Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion and see.

Three witnesses declare that Jesus is, indeed, the one who can deliver: a Gentile centurion, the temple, and the created order itself! The darkness that falls over the land as the sun fails – when it should be at its strongest – shows the significance of what's happening on the cross. Evil threatens to destroy creation and return it to the chaos before God separated darkness and light. The earth quakes as the old order dies with Christ's ultimate sacrifice and a new age is inaugurated. The curtain of the temple that separate the people from the presence of God is torn in two as the way to God is made open to all in the victorious end of Jesus'

campaign to save our broken world. The Roman centurion who oversaw Jesus' crucifixion couldn't have known about the temple curtain, but he did know that this "King of the Jews" was unlike any other man he'd seen. Jesus did not curse his killers; he prayed for them and asked for them to be forgiven. He spoke lovingly from the cross. And after hours hanging there in the midday darkness, he somehow had the strength to loudly call out to God when he gave up his spirit. It all amazed the centurion, leading him to exclaim that Jesus was righteous, indeed *the* righteous one, the Son of God.

So is Jesus the leader that you and I need, the one who could do what needed to be done for us? Yes! Jesus' whole life embodied servant leadership. On the cross, he gave himself over to suffering the separation from God that our sin, our failure to meet expectation, deserved. Jesus came to be the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise from Deuteronomy 32(:36): "*For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free.*" Through Christ, God vindicated us, declared us innocent and worthy. We had no power to justify ourselves, so God does it in our place. Jesus is the leader who delivers. He has delivered you.

We are entering into Holy Week and journeying to the high point of the whole church year. Follow Jesus from his triumphal entry to his cross. He's the servant leader that we need, not in it for himself but for you and me. Following him, deny yourself. Each of us has choices that are waiting in front of us; some of them might be clearer than others. Our choices don't vindicate us. They can't make us right before God. Jesus does that. But as people who follow Jesus, we are called to make the loving choice. It might not be popular. It might be painful. The loving choice isn't always going to be easy, but it will be the self-giving one that reflects Jesus' leadership as the servant of all. **Follow Jesus to the cross, because he delivers.**

But don't stop following at the cross. Like Jesus' disciples and friends who stood at a distance and watched his death, you might be tempted to think that because his campaign for us ended on the cross, his story ended there, too. It doesn't. Keep following Jesus to Easter and the empty tomb, and see how his story – and your story – is far from over. The greatest vindication is yet to come.

Amen.