

Who's Laughing Now?
Psalm 2, Luke 19:28-44
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
April 9, 2017 (Palm Sunday)
Pastor Dave Carver

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<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/sermon04-09-17.mp3>



I'd like to start this message by showing you one of my favorite photos that includes some of my favorite people standing in one of my favorite places in the world. This is the team that has recently returned from an amazing mission to Malawi, Central Africa. That

large rock face behind us is known as the Mulanje Massif, and we're about halfway into a hike that will take us to a delightful little waterfall. There are three things I'd like to tell you about this photo.

I love this bend in the trail because when you come close to the edge, you can see very, very clearly all sorts of places where you've already been. When you look back, you can see the path up which we've come. Look down into the valley, and the stream and the camp and the road are visible.



¹As we enter Holy Week, and as we continue our Lenten journey, and as we live into what it means to be Christians alive in the USA in the 21st century, we, too, can look back. If we look back far enough, we can catch a glimpse of the Triumphal Entry – Jesus coming into Jerusalem. Wow,

¹ *Jesus Enters Jerusalem and the Crowds Welcome Him*, Pietro Lorenzetti 1320

that was a day to remember! The waving of the palms, the enthusiasm of the children, the singing – heck, even the protest was kind of fun. Who could forget the so-called “religious leaders” who were so appalled by the things that Jesus said and did? I mean, here was Jesus, receiving and enjoying the praise of the people even as he carried their hopes on his own back, getting ready to enter into the most desolate time of his life.

There’s so much that happened on Palm Sunday, and yet from our vantage point, it’s easy to see that one of the central lessons of this day is simply that God, and not another, is in control. As we hear the echoes of the Hosannas, we can know that nothing – not even the events of that horrible week that was to come – is able to separate this creation from God’s intentions for it.

And yet, if we stand here long enough, we might also be able to hear Jesus weeping on that first Palm Sunday. We overhear his lament at the fact that we too often choose to act in ways that are contrary to the purposes of God, and we follow paths of isolation, estrangement, or violence... and Jesus weeps.



²If we stand here this morning and look a little further back, we might just be able to make out something very far off... Do you see in the events of Palm Sunday a shadow of Psalm 2? This song was written for a worship service in which a king would be crowned. It begins with a nod to the realities of its own day: there is political intrigue and conflict, and some are seeking to harm the Lord’s anointed one. The world, even then, is full of those who would thwart God’s intentions – the old translations say that “the nations rage”.

² *Coronation of King David*, Paris Psalter 10th C.

As we listen to Psalm 2, it's instructive to note that this is the only place in the entire Old Testament where God's messiah, King, and Son are mentioned in the same breath. With that in mind, it's no surprise that the early disciples remembered this Psalm as they talked about Jesus in Acts chapter 4. Jesus really became the son, king, and messiah of which the Psalm spoke, and they were able to look back and see that.

And in joining the disciples in reflecting on this Psalm, we can hear a sound that is even more distinct than the weeping of Jesus on Palm Sunday: the laughter of God. The Psalmist pictures the Lord considering the threat of the nations and finding it, well, amusing. As if the nations and their rage could threaten the eternal purposes of God. Please... The encouraging, comforting laughter of YHWH tells us that the universe is all right and that's God's care has not and will not fail.

So like those hikers in Africa, we can stand on the path and look back... and it's good.

But let me tell you something about this photo. When this image was captured, I was about dead. The day was almost unbearably hot. I was irritated at carrying a backpack that seemed to have four people's stuff in it. And, as much as it pains me to say it, I was out of gas. Every muscle in my body hurt and I was tired and achy and miserable. We took that photo because if we hadn't stopped, the "Abusa with the big hat" wouldn't have made it. I was overwhelmed, and so I suggested that we stop and take a moment to look around.

On Palm Sunday, 2017, God's people in Crafton Heights will do well to pause and look around. Does anyone else feel as though you're having a hard time? Have you felt this week or last week or sometime recently like it's been really tough sledding? And I'm not just talking about your

kidney stones or your sister-in-law's job, I'm talking about the big picture. 3000 years ago, the Psalmist said that the nations were raging. 2000 years ago, Jesus walked right into a plot led by the religious leaders.

And this week, scores of innocent people were killed in a gas attack in Syria. Already this month, 43 Ethiopian children have been abducted from their villages by armed gunmen who killed 28 adults in the process. There are senior citizens in our own country who lack basic health care. Children in our neighborhood are going to bed hungry. Relationships are strained or broken. Many of us feel as though we are dwelling in uninterrupted pain or grief or depression. You think that maybe you heard Jesus weeping on Palm Sunday but in reality it was the not-so-stifled cries of the people around you. The nations have not stopped their raging.

We stop now, as we hide out here in worship, because we have to. We are threatened by the magnitude of the evil that we see on a daily basis. We come in and we talk about the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, but so many times that runs counter to our experience. It hurts. People are horrible to each other. If we can possibly hear the laughter of God, we're not always experiencing it as comfort...there are days when it sounds as though even the Divine One is making a mockery of our very existence. We cry out in the midst of our pain and alienation, "Where are you now, God?"

Oh, we don't always show it. I mean, look at that photo. I'm hiding behind the group. You can't hear my wheezing. I look happy enough, but don't believe it for a moment. Too often the rest of you do the exact same thing... you waltz in here and you're dying on the inside but you won't show it for a moment. The nations rage, and we feel it on the inside, even if we can't show it...

OK, there's one more thing you need to know about this photo and the place where it was taken: from where we are standing on the mountainside, we can't see where we are going next. The path at this point disappears into some pretty heavy growth and winds around the side of the mountain. Oh, sure, the people who have been here before will tell you all about the waterfall that lies ahead, but you can't see it or hear it from here. If you've never been there before, you can't even begin to imagine the beauty of the spot to which we're headed, or the way that those icy waters will refresh and invigorate even the weariest of muscles. Yet every single person in this photo turned to their right and marched into the forest, even though only three of us had ever been there before.



And truth be told, that's a good metaphor for a lot of us in church now. We may be here because we've always come, or we may have a vague hope that somehow things will work out all right for us. Maybe we trust in the one who invited us into this part of the journey, or we believe that the path wouldn't have led this far just to stop – I mean, it's got to lead somewhere, right?

And so we keep walking. We hold on to the hope that Psalm 2 is true. We rely on the fact that the events of Palm Sunday are, in fact, a foretaste of what is to come.

Listen: I wish that I could stand here and tell you how you will experience the laughter of God in your own life. I long to give you the absolute assurance that you will receive healing in your own life; that your child will grow into a healthy, happy, and energetic adulthood; that your job will not be erased in the next sequence of downsizing. I wish I could say all of that for you, and you, and you...

But to be honest, I can't see that far ahead on the path for you or for me; and, unlike that mountain in Africa, I've never been *here* before.

But what I can say is this: that I am confident of the path, and that I believe the one who called us to walk on it with him. I trust that in a cosmic sense, we are going to arrive at the truth that seems so far off right now.

The people frozen in that photo are in the in-between. They're not where they started, but they can't yet imagine how they'll finish. Similarly, Palm Sunday is between the glory of the incarnation with all of the angels and the shepherds and the wise men and the astounding news of the resurrection... but with the pain of Holy Week on the immediate horizon.

Likewise, the death and resurrection of Jesus itself is between the unspoiled beauty of creation as described in Genesis and the ultimate healing that is put forward in the resurrection of the body and recreation of the world of which we spoke last week.

So, too, are we, right now, pausing to catch our breath, knowing that we are on our way. And since we don't know what's ahead, specifically, for any one of us, then for God's sake let's do our best to make the journey better for each of us.

Right before this photo was taken, I had set that heavy pack down. After our break, Joe picked up the pack and carried it for me. Our friend Keith walked with the team, and talked in a way that was encouraging and inspiring. Rachael saw that a couple of folks had emptied their water bottles, and she shared from her own.



I know. You're not going to Malawi – at least not any time soon. But you can do

all that stuff, you know. You have it in you to pick up someone else's load for a while, even if he didn't ask you to. You can stand next to your friend and tell her that you're tired, or scared, or unsure. You can share what you have, even when you're not sure that it will be enough. And you can keep on walking – walk right through the pain and betrayal of the upper room, into the darkness of Good Friday and the cold deadness of Holy Saturday. You can keep walking until you get a glimpse of the sunrise of the resurrection.

Maybe you can't hear the laughter of God right now. But it's coming. I promise you, it's coming. And it is for you. Thanks be to God, it is for you, and for the innocents of Syria and the children of Ethiopia; it is for the One who rode a donkey into Jerusalem and for those who waited with him at his execution. In a real and final sense, the laughter of God is for the last, the lost, the least, the little and the dead. God laughs. And it's good. Amen.