

THE NON ANXIOUS PRESENCE
Palm Sunday –April 1, 2012 –Matthew 21: 1-11
The Church of the Covenant

“As a sheep led to the slaughter, HE opened not His mouth...” (Isaiah 53: 7-8) How could Jesus do that? When He was before the Sanhedrin and was being judged for His life, He didn’t defend Himself. How could Jesus do that? When He was before Caiaphas the High Priest, the priest who said it was *“expedient that one man should die for the people.”*, before Caiaphas Jesus said nothing. How could Jesus do that? When He was before Pontius Pilate and His life hung in the balance, there were no protestations –Pilate saying: *“Do you not know I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” (John 19: 10)* *“But Jesus gave no answer...”* What a stark contrast this must have been, a normal, regular person pleading in desperation for their life; Jesus calm and saying nothing. How could Jesus do that?

In the face of death and ignominy, torture, mocking and pain Jesus opened not His mouth; Jesus was calm in the face of the storms of Holy Week. How could Jesus do that?

But equally amazing was that Jesus was amazingly unaffected and quiet in the face of His being hailed as Messiah on Palm Sunday. The crowd has gathered for Passover; perhaps as many as two million people were gathered in the Holy City, Jerusalem. Jesus has just done His greatest miracle, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and His renown has doubtlessly spread like wildfire to Jerusalem in advance of His arrival. The entire city is abuzz with the news. Is Jesus the Messiah? Did He indeed raise a man from the dead? Is He the long anticipated one? The crowd is repeating His name; His name is on their lips and in their heart; *“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!”*; any politician would give his eye teeth for that kind of name recognition; that kind of positive notoriety. As it says, *“all the city was stirred”* –all two million people abuzz with the news of Jesus as Messiah. Everyone is asking everyone –*“Who is this?” “Who IS this?” (Matthew 21: 10)*

But Jesus is strangely calm and unaffected by the adulation of the crowd. He is quiet and within His own thoughts, astride that donkey, humble, thoughtful, removed from the moment, detached. The crowd is going wild –Jesus is silent. The crowd is shouting –*“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 21: 9)* But Jesus is silent and calm and unaffected by it all. Does HE know that in five short days this same crowd will be shouting with equal force –*“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”?????* Does He know the fickleness of humanity; hailed as victor one day and condemned as heretic the next? Does He remember that Jerusalem kills almost all the prophets God sends to it? Does He remember that the Holy City kills all those that are Holy whom the Holy God sends? Does He remember *“Beware when you think you stand, lest you fall”*? When all the crowd is saying your name, hailing your success, how did Jesus take it all with a grain of salt? How was He unaffected by the praise of others? How could Jesus do it?

Do you notice that the self-same peace and calm, silence and detachment, that Jesus had when He went to the cross HE also has when He is being hailed as Messiah, King and Lord? He takes His BEST DAY – Palm Sunday—and His WORST DAY, Good Friday, and treats them remarkably the same. We, on the other hand, would bask in the glory of the praise of the crowds on Palm Sunday. Not Jesus. We, on the other hand, would moan and complain, remonstrate and beg and attempt to defend, in face of high priests, and Pilate and angry lynch mob-like crowds. How did Jesus do it?

There is an amazing book entitled *“Generation to Generation”* by Dr. Edwin Friedman. It is a book that seeks to understand churches as family systems. It is the best book I have ever read on understanding what I call, “Church World”. Don’t understand a church as an institution or as an entity; understand it as a family, as a system, functional and dysfunctional, working and broken. In this book by Friedman he has a section on the *“Non Anxious Presence”*, from which I take the title of this sermon. When a church becomes upset over something, when the people of God experience great loss, like the loss of a beloved associate pastor and are grieving, when a church is going through the anxious times of transition, or when there are major changes going on out there in the denomination that have major impacts on the local church, this creates monumental anxiety, stress, dysfunction. A church might act in a way that seems bizarre and unlike itself, in ways where it would never act on a better, brighter, more non anxious day. By the way this works in families, and businesses, and school board meetings, and at work and at home, when you’re going through major disagreements, when you’re going through times of divorce, in every setting and situation, not just the church, but Friedman suggests that when the family system the church is anxious and upset about something it is then that you as the pastoral leader need to be and become “The Non Anxious Presence”. In the midst of the raging storms of anxiety all about you, you must have peace. If you buy into the anxiety you ratchet it up; if you choose to not buy into the anxiety you ratchet anxiety down. How you choose to react to either people hailing your name and suggesting your god-like successes and how you choose to react to people seeking to pull you down and crucify you will make all the difference in the world. In the face of anxiety do we react with more anxiety...or do we react in faith. Do we buy into the fear and emotion run amuck in the crowd that is a lynch mob in the making? Or do we choose to trust the Lord? Fear or faith? Anxiety or being a Non Anxious Presence? Raw emotions out of control or choosing to be like Jesus? **Spiritual Leadership in the life of the church is choosing to be a Non Anxious Presence. Spiritual leadership is to choose to be like JESUS!**

So how did Jesus do it? How can you be a Non Anxious Presence in the middle of whatever storm in life besets you at the moment? How can we be like Jesus?

The Bible talks about having a *“peace which passeth all understanding”* (Philippians 4: 7). It is a peace which is not logical; it passeth understanding; we do not understand it. The ability to be a Non Anxious Presence is not our own; it is not normative; it is the very secret of spiritual leadership whether in the church, or family, or business or world. If you have this peace, people will take note; you will have something the world does not have and something the world cannot give. *“My peace I leave with you”*, says Jesus. *“Not as the world gives do I give you peace...”* No, no, beloved, this is not the peace of the world, this is the peace Jesus had on Palm Sunday AND on Good Friday that He gives to us. *“He IS our peace”*, as the Bible says. Jesus IS peace; to have Jesus IS peace; to have Jesus alive within our heart is to have PEACE within our heart; it is to possess the peace which passeth all understanding that Jesus had and through HIM and in HIM we can possess that same peace, as well. We can be a Non Anxious Presence when the crowd is hailing our name; we can be a Non Anxious Presence when the crowd is seeking to crucify us. Our peace is NOT DETERMINED by our outward circumstances; our peace is determined by the presence of the One who IS our Non Anxious Presence and our PEACE deep within our heart. Our peace comes not from the outward circumstances of our world; our peace comes from Jesus being alive within.

It is no secret what Jesus can do. What He did on Palm Sunday within His own heart He can do for you. What He did on Good Friday within His own heart He can do for you.

Who is this? Who can have peace like this within? Who is this? Who can face triumph and tragedy in one short week and still have peace within His heart? Who is this? Who can face the adulation of the

crowd and the pain of the cross and be curiously unaffected by it all? What mere human being could do this and be this way?

Who is this? It is the same question the crowd asked on Palm Sunday --Who is this? Who IS this?.....**THIS COULD ONLY BE THE VERY SON OF GOD!!!!**

And if you want the peace which Jesus had, and if you want an inner strength that nothing in this world can take away, and if you want to be a Non Anxious Presence just like Jesus was and is...then, beloved, you just invite this Messiah to ride into the portals of your heart this Palm Sunday and you can be a Non Anxious Presence just like Jesus.

Jesus can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves –grant us the peace which passeth understanding, that comes only from God.

Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*