

*Based on Luke 22 - 23. The Liturgy of The Passion.*

It may be disjuncting, for many of us, on this Palms-to-Passion Sunday, to find our focus here in the sanctuary, not on a cross, but on an image of Paradise. A river of the water of life, flowing. Grass and trees thriving. Evidence of the sun shining, either sunrise or sunset. No cross in sight. No cross even imaginable in this garden of glory.

How can it be that we focus on Paradise, we might wonder, when the point of the Liturgy of The Passion is to meditate on the suffering of Christ? On the sacrifice. On the solidarity with a suffering world, which we sure could use right now. On the mirror of our own violence exposed.

Which is all true. The suffering, the sacrifice, the solidarity, the violence. All of it true.

But today, in Luke's Gospel, we hear another truth. *Truly, I tell you*, Jesus says from the cross, *today you will be with me in Paradise.*

According to theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, the early church took Jesus at his word. Not just for one thief on the cross, who begged to be remembered, but for us all. In their conclaves and catacombs, in their house churches and formal sanctuaries, the early church, like us today, found their focus, not on a cross, but on an image of Paradise, with a risen Christ as a living presence: a shepherd or a healer or a teacher or an enthroned god. The Eucharist, as well, for the early church, was far more than a piece of bread and a sip of juice. It was a full on multi-course meal: the Potluck of Paradise. An overflowing table for all, as God intended from the beginning.

The point of this focus on Paradise, Brock and Parker suggest, was to teach Paradise as a way of life, to practice Paradise as *a shared accomplishment in which the exercise of human powers and the imperatives of human need worked together to save and sustain life* (*Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, 106). Which sounds a whole lot like who we say we want to be at SPC: a community that *welcome[s] all who long for meaning, hope, and belonging ... a community committed to being and becoming people of radical compassion, working for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world.*

The challenge, for us, as for the early church, is that we cannot simply *think* our way to this kind of community. We have to practice it. Day in and day out. Week in and week out. With all of our fumbling and mumbling. With all of our soaring success.

Which leads us to humility. To the heartfelt acknowledgment that we need help in our practice of Paradise. Which is, in the end, what the church is really all about. A gathering of imperfect people in search of a perfect God, through The Way of Jesus, who really will remember us when he comes into his kingdom.

Which is, at least this year, the perfect Palms-to-Passion meditation.

Let the church say, Amen!