

Trinity UMC Palm Sunday Sermon April 10, 2022
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Honest Questions, Compassionate Response

During this Lenten Season, we have been taking time during worship to ask some honest questions and then to hear a compassionate response from our holy scriptures.

Let's think today about how it is that Jesus orchestrated a low-budget parade into a city where he knew his days were numbered. "Get me a colt," he said. Not a steed. Not a float. Not a big red chariot. He wanted a young, inexperienced donkey. And folks gathered and his friends started some liturgical shouting that ticked off the local priests. Cloaks were thrown down and palms were waved. A parade, a procession, a party!

And maybe we should wonder...how did so much positive, happy energy come together all at the same time and the same place? Had the grapevine spread the word so successfully that the long-awaited Messiah was finally come? Did the hope and dream of God's kingdom on earth live so deeply in the hearts of people at that time that they were ready for the new world to break forth?

After centuries of hearing the prophets describe a new heaven and a new earth, were the crowds fed up with their poverty and their low class status in the Empire? Tired of being oppressed and taxed and limited in how they could live? So that they dared that one day to celebrate the coming of God's kingdom, here and now, in spite of all evidence to the contrary? Did one person's conviction and voice spread like wild-fire through the crowd so that they could together, with Jesus on a donkey, give voice to their faith that God's miracle was coming true in spite of it all?

Life is hard and we all need friends and a community of faith. We sometimes need to join with a crowd who agrees with us that God is good and everything is going the way God wants it to—even here and even now. We are created for interdependence. So all our hiding and pretending that we are "perfectly fine" all on our own just won't work. Ask yourself this: What great dream of God's victory do you hold dear in your heart and What keeps you from connecting with others around that hope? Let us take a moment of silent reflection...

Silent Reflection

Hear this compassionate word from the Letter to the Philippians: "...live your life in a manner worth of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one Spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and be in no way intimidated by your opponents (1:27) Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (2:5a)..."

Know that already, God is offering us freedom from isolation
as we are called into the kind of community Christ had in mind for all.
We are invited to the audacity of interdependence
so that we might recognize love in its giving and receiving.
That we might together, affirm God's power over evil and God's intentions for
this Good and Beautiful creation of which we are just one small part.
And know, that despite our sometimes withdrawal from those who love us,
in the name of Jesus Christ, you are being forgiven, even now.
**In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.
Glory to God! Amen.**

Gospel Reading
Luke 19: 28-40

After [Jesus] had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it."

Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

A Word of God that is still speaking,
Thanks be to God.

Thoughts about an Imperfect Life and Faith

"We are a group project."

I talked with one of my pastor colleagues the other day about Palm Sunday preaching. She was all set with her sermon...encouraging people to listen to the Scripture, place themselves in the scene and then imagine each players thoughts and motivations and consequences. I envied her such a great outline, so early in the week. Because I, myself was hung up on the crowd thing. I tell you the truth, the pandemic has messed me up when it comes to being around a lot of people. Maybe some of you too?

I'm skittish about big crowds in a whole new way. I first noticed it a few weeks at a Leadership conference at Bay College...I may have already mentioned that to some of you. The Michigan Annual Conference is coming up the first week of June over in Traverse City and that's got me spooked...8 or 900 people usually. And just think of all those germs...That is not something pre-pandemic that I ever gave much thought to.

But there I was, this week, when I read about a crowd of people and Jesus entering into Jerusalem...I can't help it, super-imposing my personal and current experiences onto something that happened thousands of years ago...even when I knew: There was no pandemic going on. There was no medical reason for those people to avoid crowding along the streets of Jerusalem. And even if there was, they wouldn't have known about it. So...I had to stop and think it through. Because it was bugging me. And I needed to face my own subjective reality, before being able to see the holy intention intended in this scripture. I can't be a credible preacher/interpreter of God's holy word if I allow my personal issues to distort the story. Right?

That kind of personal interpretation is exactly the challenge of the printing press and of translating the Bible into all different languages. Everyone who reads the Bible, understands it from their own view-point. From their experiences. From whatever they may have been taught in Sunday School or by a preacher or teacher. There's a big word for that...hermeneutic which basically means the mental framework within which understanding is developed.

In order for me to move ahead with this sermon, I had to admit that my goofy thinking about the pandemic really is irrelevant to what was going on that day when Jesus came into Jerusalem on the donkey. Then, I had to put that 'personal view/hermeneutic' to one side and seek, as much as humanly possible, the voice of God, the breath of the Holy Spirit and the intention of Christ's teaching around this event. That's what we are all called to do as we read the Bible—put aside our pre-conceived notions. And it's not always easy but that's the only way I know to open a window into the heart and mind of Jesus.

At first, I was caught by the joy and the happiness of the event...as Jesus, on a donkey no less, the disciples and the crowd move into Jerusalem. Do you remember December and the Advent Season preaching? Yes, the prophets fore-told it...A Messiah would come! A new creation was possible. God's covenant with God's people was eternal and would someday manifest in a Messiah—God with us! And maybe it's happening today...or soon.

And then on that starry, starry night, do you remember that there were The Angels singing from on high, the night of Jesus' birth. And the shepherd's in the field who came to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and who carried the news—and all were amazed! And on that Parade day, the babe is a full grown person and here with us, going before us into the holiest of cities, to the Temple, the very home of God. Maybe today is the day...or soon...when God will be revealed so clearly that there will be no doubt in anyone's mind... that Justice and

Mercy and Love are real and present and coming true.

And Jesus himself, leading the way...with his healing miracles. With his torrents of wisdom and practical insights in how to be faithful to God. The resurrection of Lazarus And dinner parties and friend groups and on this particular day...riding on a donkey no less...Maybe today is the day that the people will be set free from Roman rule. When the darkness of disease and death will be forever banished. When all who have been wounded by disease, betrayal and despair will be healed and rise up singing.

And people came together in that seemingly impossible hope and gave themselves over to celebration and thanksgiving and joy, as they waved their palms and laid their cloaks in front of the donkey, no less, which carried Jesus into the city.

That's just what we need sometimes, right? A happy parade sermon where even the somewhat grim and worried people come out to see what's going on. And if the crowds were silent...well, even the stones would be shouting out.

But, of course, Happy Parade is not the whole story is it? We can't 'not know' what comes next. Just because we only read this one part of the events of the coming Holy Week, I can't forget that the crowds, just some days later are going to turn against Jesus. In a cruel and even violent way. Which kind of takes away from the fun, joyful, happiness of the Palm Parade into Jerusalem.

So I can't preach just an early celebration sermon this morning...even though we too have enjoyed Hallelujah, praise be to the Lord moments together. Moving into Holy Week, we are also preparing to move through the final days of God's gracious entry into our humanity. And there will be blood. And there will be betrayal. And there will be political wrangling of the lowest order. There will be a passing of the buck and the manipulation of the crowd. There will be ego and power driven power brokers who claim to be doing 'what's best' and there will be timid and fearful people who retreat to whatever false safety has seemingly served them in the past.

Yes, my friends, we are on the threshold of Holy Week. I'm glad there's this one last glimpse, this happy parade moment for us when we can wave Palms and shout Hosanna in the highest...blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Because it's going to get dark before the light of Easter shines next Sunday.

My hope is that you will not walk this dark week alone. The Holy Week trajectory is familiar ground to most of us...so familiar that perhaps we think we don't have to pay too much attention to the yuck stuff and can just quickly skip to Easter flowers and chocolates. But don't cheat yourself that way.

Take some time to gather with other followers of Jesus at the Community worship events and here on Maundy Thursday. Don't worry too much about going to a different building and being with people you may not know. It's OK. You can do it! I will be at each of these events on this green sheet to greet you and assure you that we are all in

this together.

This week, I hope you will all take some time to put aside your pre-conceived notions about what happened those long years ago. Read the Gospel accounts of the last week of Jesus life. Each one is told from a different perspective and each one will impact your heart and mind in its own special way. This year, this Holy Week may well be offering you some new insight and understanding that you never would have come to on your own. Maybe God has engineered for you this week, a fresh and life-giving experience of the living Lord who loves you and is with you always...whether you are paying attention or not.

Those of you who don't get out so much...Don't do this Holy Week thing alone. Think about calling someone from your church to talk and reflect on what it means that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried. And then, on the 3rd day rose again to spend another 50 days with us before ascending into heaven.

No matter what else is going on in the world, the followers of Jesus, this week and always for that matter, are bound together by the Holy Spirit who knits us into a collective community of grace. Imperfect we are, but somehow, through the love of Jesus, our Father who art in Heaven calls us Children of God. Brothers and sisters with each other. We are a family of faith. Servants to the world, a community of disciples, believers, followers. We are the witnesses to God's mighty power and grace. And God knows we are saints and sinners and sometimes silly human beings and yet...God also intends for us to be so much more **together** than we could ever be all by ourselves. We are the Beloved of God and we follow Jesus.

In closing and in preparation for this Holy Week, hear these words of Paul to the people of Philippi:

Philippians 2: 5 – 11 in Sermon

5 Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

7 but Jesus emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 Jesus humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The Spirit of God be with us all this week and always. Amen.

Let us pray.

Almighty God...you came to live among us in the full humanity of Jesus Christ...
knowing that death on the cross was not only a possibility but inevitable.
We grieve that such cruelty and bloodshed is so often necessary for us to pay attention.
We open ourselves to receive the freedom and power you offer so that when we are
challenged by the powers of cruelty and greed and destruction of this world, that we too,
like Jesus, can give of ourselves with humility and love and forgiveness.
Don't allow the joy of parades and the distractions of this world make us forget the
example that Jesus offers us—to speak truth, to tell the world of our trust in you, and to
live as those who know that our hope is well-placed in your loving and merciful hands.

I lift up to you those in our congregation and community and families who continue to
struggle with medical situations that sometimes seem so resistant to human doctoring.
You are the Healer of all that is broken...bring healing where it is needed in the ways
that are right for those who hurt.
I lift up to you oh God, those who are grieving and those who are uncertain of their next
steps in life. You bring joy in the morning even when tears last the night. You
remember us even when we forget ourselves.
Tend to your world oh God in the many places and ways that are so far beyond our
reach. Bring peace to the hearts and minds of the political leaders so that they may
sincerely work for the well-being of the people in their realms.

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