

Parades and Shouts of Hosanna

Matthew 21:1-11

April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday

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As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

"Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Matthew 21:1-11

I've been thinking about all of the large, celebratory gatherings that will not happen this spring.

What if Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem happened now, when many of us must shelter in place and groups are banned? No one would line the roads waving palms or throwing their coats on the road. Jesus plus his disciples makes for a group of thirteen, too many for that upper room Passover meal. How would they have held the Last Supper under these circumstances? While I am unsure how these events would have been altered, I am certain Jesus would still enter Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week would unfold - different, no doubt, but unthwarted.

I've been thinking about graduations cancelled, weddings postponed, award ceremonies, proms, festivals, concerts, jobs, even funerals that cannot go on as usual. The normal rhythms and milestone markers are gone, as time takes on an amorphous quality, simultaneously feeling as if it is flying and not moving at all. We have not gathered in our church building today. No parading parade around waving palms. Last year I had just started as your pastor. Palm Sunday was my second Sunday. In my previous church in New Jersey, we would order small palm fronds from the florist for the children to use for the Palm Sunday procession. You can imagine my shock last year when I saw 6-foot palm tree branches displayed around the church and offered to adults and children for the parade around the sanctuary. Amazing! Wonderful! Impressive!

Not this year. This year our only option is to read and remember when Jesus entered Jerusalem. Even if crowds do not line the highway and shout, even if only two or three can gather at home, even if we

worship from our sofa instead of in our chairs in the chapel or sanctuary, we remember the parade, the procession so long ago.

Our Palm Sunday celebrations will be quieter, simpler, less demonstrative than we would have imagined just weeks ago, but they will not be stopped. Jesus enters our living rooms no less than he walked the streets of Jerusalem and we can still cry out to him, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

We may want to whisper, rather than shout. Some of us may put a question mark instead of an exclamation point on the end of those proclamations. Many of us cannot help but wonder what this One who rides humbly on a donkey can do to help our stirred-up world. Everyone yearns to know when things will return to some semblance of normal. This Palm and Passion Sunday fills with our questions even as we strain to shout our affirmations. (1)

On that day so long ago when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on borrowed donkey procured by fumbling, denying, betraying followers, some of the crowds called out in joyous belief, others questioned what all the fuss was about, and none of them really knew what was to come just a few days later. The whole scene was a mixed bag of human emotions, opinions, understanding and perspectives.

Even those who named Jesus a prophet from Nazareth didn't get it completely right. Even the disciples, obedient and dutiful in following Jesus' directions, couldn't be fully prepared for the suffering soon to come. In all of their complicated humanity, they did the best they could in that moment and so, too, do we.

As we grieve what is lost this year - the waving palms, the soaring swell of the organ, the joy of singing with one another in the sanctuary, the touch of handshakes and hugs - we can be sure the Holy One, the Beloved meets us where we are, no matter how we are, and will not stop on the outskirts of Jerusalem or on the fringes of our lives. Jesus enters fully into the city knowing what's to come. Christ is with us, accepting whatever we offer, a palm branch or old jeans with holes, exuberant praise or mumbled hope.

Our world, our lives, the whole city is stirred up right now. Then, as now, Jesus comes into places and spaces of upheaval, injustice, sickness, need and evil. He came into this shaken-up earthly realm to lift the veil of all that blinds us from seeing and knowing Divine love. Calls us and brings us healing and wholeness, forgiveness and mercy, grace upon grace.

The word for "stirred up" is found only five times in all of the New Testament. Three of those five are in Matthew's Gospel, and all three of those occurrences relate to Jesus' Passion and resurrection. This stirred-up city will be the site, in just a few days, where the earth will shake, rocks will split and the temple curtain will be torn in two. This celebratory scene, teeming with people, will soon be deserted, Jesus dying alone with only the women remaining. Then the earth will shake yet again, the stone will be rolled away and the guards will be the ones who tremble in fear at the sight of the dazzling angel on Easter morning.

All this upheaval, cities stirred up with anxiety and illness, countries heaving with disasters natural and unnatural, human beings reeling from forces well outside of their control. The Beloved enters into the fray, vulnerable, humble, so close to see our faces, hear our prayers and questions, feel our swirling emotions.

As the events of Holy Week unfold, even Jesus' closest friends will abandon him. All will seem lost and dead and beyond redemption, but only for a while, for three days when time will seem to stand still. Then God will upend all our expectations yet again, and those tasked with keeping Jesus in the grave will be the ones shaken and rendered useless, because nothing can stop Easter, either.

It is hard. We want that joyous and triumphal Palm Sunday parade. And yet we know Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was really not a joyous triumphal procession. He was offering a different vision of life, of community, of power. In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan contrast Jesus' triumphal entry with Pontius Pilate's. On that day, Pilate entered Jerusalem on the other side of the city in a military parade showing the power of the Roman Empire. The trappings of these triumphal entries are well known. The latest in military machinery is on display, whether it be horses and chariots. The leader is an undisputed strongman. Whether he be Pilate or Caesar, he used his parade to bolster his own power and position and that of a select ruling class. The triumphal entry displays the might of empire.

Jesus does the parade all wrong. Instead of entering Jerusalem on a stallion, he enters on a small donkey. Neither an army nor the rich and famous accompany Jesus on his march. Instead his disciples, a ragtag group of fishermen, common folk, and at least one disreputable tax collector, make up the entourage.

The crowds themselves may not even be from Jerusalem. These are, perhaps, the very people Jesus healed and fed, country folk too desperate to wait at home for help and too poor to buy their own lunch. Waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks, they make an unscripted celebration. It's a reversal of the whole point of a triumphal entry.

How does this ancient story help us in this time of being home, of missing processions, events, parades, celebrations? Maybe reminding us of what it feels like to be stirred up. I find myself feeling many emotions when I watch PBS news.

Tears run down my face - overflowing ERs with under-equipped doctors and nurses, freezer trucks as morgues, caravans of migrant workers in India.

And then my tears also flow at the beauty - people hanging out of windows and off balconies raucously applauding doctors and nurses at shift change time. And there are parades of different kinds - a little girl being given a "birthday parade" of cars driving by her house honking. I even witnessed a parade in our neighborhood. Parents and little girl on the lawn along the road. The girl was holding a sign. Soon here comes a parade of decorated cars. Honking their horns. Teachers from the elementary school driving through the neighborhood - We miss you! We love you! We are here to help! - How wonderful!

Our humanity is showing. Both the horror and the beauty are on full display right now. The weakness and the strength, side by side. Tears feel like an appropriate response. Also, God is here. In all of it. Right here in it. Always meeting us in the places we don't expect or forget to look. (2)

Death and life, lament and resurrection - it's all right at the surface. I want to live awake to it AND being awake hurts a little bit right now. But I am working hard to let myself stay permeable, to allow the sorrow and joy move through me, to rinse me out and get me ready for more. I want to keep watching for God in the midst of it all. I want to keep seeing people. This feels like the most important thing I can do.

I'm remembering now that this means resting more too, and turning news off on purpose sometimes as well. Sabbath has never been more important. For me, taking Fridays or Saturdays off. No work. Just rest. Being outdoors. Reading good novels. Making good food. Naps. Tending the house. Tending my family relationships. The boundaries are not easy for me, but they feel vitally important.

When have your tears been coming?

How have you been experiencing humanity - your own and others'?

What has been your Sabbath?

What boundaries are helping you navigate things?

How will you mark this journey through Holy Week this year?

Living awake takes courage. Staying open takes a willingness to be broken open. Our humanity is on full display. But out there, in here, there is grace for it all. There is grace for what happens, and grace for our response to it, and grace for the next thing after that.

A refrain has been going through my head as we move into Holy Week.

Spirit, open my heart, to the joy and pain of living...

Share a verse of song I recently learned.

Refrain

Spirit open my heart

To the joy and pain of living

As you love may I love

In receiving and in giving

Spirit, open my heart

May God's grace fill us each day. Spirit, open our hearts, to the joy and pain of living. Amen.

Spirit, Open My Heart

Refrain

Spirit open my heart
To the joy and pain of living
As you love may I love
In receiving and in giving
Spirit, open my heart

1) God, replace my stony heart
with a heart that's kind and tender.
All my coldness and fear
to your grace I now surrender.

2) Write your love upon my heart
as my law, my goal, my story.
In each thought, word, and deed,
may my living bring you glory.

3) May I weep with those who weep,
share the joy of sister, brother.
In the welcome of Christ,
may we welcome one another.

Spirit, Open My Heart

Text by Ruth Duck 1994

Tune Name: WILD MOUNTAIN THYME

#692 Glory to God hymnal

1) Jill Duffield, Presbyterian Outlook, 3/31/2020

<https://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/>

2) Kara Root, "Our Humanity is Showing," inthehereandnow blog

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2020/04/our-humanity-is-showing.html>