

Sermon title: “A City in Turmoil” ©2020 Ellen Clark Clémot

April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday

Sermon text: Matthew 21: 1-11

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Theme: **Christ enters our lives with hope and a promise, even in the most desperate times - or, perhaps, because of them.**

“Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

The crowds ushering in Jesus as their Savior were joyful and excited when he appeared at the city gates of Jerusalem. Here was the man the prophets had promised, riding humbly on the back of a donkey, and the foal of a donkey, just like scripture foretold.

How appropriate that the cheers shouted out for a Savior. “Hosanna!” literally means “Save us.” Here “Hosanna” is used as a shout of praise. For us, today, we might call out Hosanna to Jesus, but mean it more literally: “Save us, Jesus! Save us from this virus that is everywhere. Save my family! Save my job! Save my earnings. Save my life!”

Rev. Jill Duffield wrote a compelling piece in *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine this week, musing on what Palm Sunday would have looked like in a time of quarantine. What if Jesus arrived at one of the eight city gates of Jerusalem, but no one was there to greet him? He would have marched in anyway, she concluded. The events of Holy Week would happen, the supper the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the torture, the dying – but the grand entry would have been different. No crowds. Maybe people waving palms from their windows. Social Distancing. Like in New York City these days, every night at 7pm – people open their windows, go out on their balconies and fire escapes, and they clap their hands with gratitude. They applaud the hospital workers, the emergency responders, the medics who risk their lives to help save our lives. There is a glimmer of Jesus there. Jesus, who sacrificed his life for ours. But only God can accomplish eternal life-giving, the resurrection hope, that Christ would bring. Whether there was a parade, or palms, or shouts of Hosanna, Jesus was on his way to complete his life’s work. Not even death could stop God’s good purposes for us.

When we think of all the gatherings we have had to postpone this spring, or cancel outright – entire sports seasons, long-planned weddings, Senior spring, and all those graduations, we start to wonder if anything will ever be the same again. I had my own disappointment last month from Duke Divinity School where I completed my distance-learning doctoral work in February. I was preparing to participate in a graduation ceremony in North Carolina this May. “We’ll mail you your diploma,” the registrar wrote. No grand procession, no parade.

Our high school and college seniors feel the disappointment even more keenly. And the seniors in medical school have been given an accelerated class completion date, authorized by the Governor to begin practicing medicine, anointed as “medical doctors” a few months early in order to assist at the front lines of the war against covid-19.

Perhaps nothing will ever be the same again. (It was not to be the same ever again after Jesus arrived in Jerusalem either.) Our own Palm Sunday celebration is different this year. Church online. Remote access only. A worship service spliced together with sound bites of music and prayer and a livestream broadcast from the pastor’s spare bedroom. No little children waving palms, running down the center aisle of the sanctuary. No excited cries of “Hosannah!” But perhaps we are making our own small shouts, deep inside – “Lord, help us!”

Like disoriented disciples, we, too, will march on through the grim days ahead as we approach our region's death "apex" – the milestone we hope and pray will come in just a week or two, after which we can start to say: "it's slowing down. We're getting better. The worst is behind us." So, too, Jesus insisted on entering the gates to Jerusalem, taking the ultimate journey to his death on a cross, to that terrible day, Good Friday, when the shouts of "Hosanna!" turn to angry cries of "crucify him!" Dark days lie ahead.

Palm Sunday was never meant to be a triumphal entry for Jesus, not a pompous display. Everything about his entry into Jerusalem was ironic reversal. Entering on a donkey, with cloaks for a saddle, his feet nearly touching the ground as his borrowed ride climbed the steep hill towards Zion's Gate. Jesus was welcomed into the city by a rag-tag crowd, perhaps the same ones he had fed and cured along the way from Galilee, people who became his adoring followers, the poor and rejected who were finally given a sign of hope and a promise of inclusion.

Yet, something was afoot. Something extraordinary was happening that day. The whole city was in turmoil, Matthew tells us. The crowds ran ahead of Jesus shouting: "Hosanna to the Son of David – Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" A song of praise reserved for a King, or a military victor, for the one who has saved a people. The crowd cries out: "Save us!" to the one who already has.

"The city was in turmoil, asking: Who is this?" Who has stirred us up out of our slumber? Who has drawn such a crowd, and yet seems like no one, not a king, but a humble peasant riding on a donkey, not even just a donkey, but a colt, the foal of a donkey?

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Fifteen years ago, "historical Jesus" theorists Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan wrote a book called *The Last Week*, in which they imagined the day-by-day events of Holy Week as Jesus might have experienced them. Their picture of Palm Sunday was a clever mix of a historical and social reality of Passover week in Roman-occupied Jerusalem.

Imagine Jesus entering the city with fanfare befitting a King, while Pontius Pilate arrives in Jerusalem by another road to the grand Damascus Gate. Pilate, Rome's designated "Ruler" of the region would have come to Jerusalem to quell any unrest during Passover, when thousands of Jewish pilgrims would have made their way to worship at the Temple. Pilate would have arrived with full military accompaniment, horses, stallions even, to carry him and his grand entourage along the cobbled way to the central gates, reserved for the Governor, with chariots, and pageantry, and bodyguards.

No adoring crowds would have lined the streets cheering on the oppressor, the ruler from Rome. Curious onlookers perhaps, but no one shouting out "Hosanna!" Or "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The City *was* in turmoil. Many were shaken up that Pilate was arriving, that Rome's envoy was showing up in the midst of their sacred Passover time. While others were shaken up by the shouting on the other side of town, the cheers and the hysterical palm-waving for a humble stranger on a borrowed colt. The popular vote went to Jesus. And when he passed through the gate to Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil over the question: "Who is this?"

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Our Palm Sunday traditions and celebrations are more subdued this year, but they have not stopped. We know that the enemy is at one gate even as our Savior appears at another. The

virus has not yet peaked. Every day the death toll mounts. We slog on, waiting, hoping, praying that the worst of this pandemic will be behind us soon.

But even as we are kept at home, isolated and often alone, nothing can stop the Son of God from entering our living rooms and filling our homes with hope. Jesus is entering our lives again just as he did that day in Jerusalem 2000 years ago to the shouts of “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” - the wild optimism of a people long oppressed. We may be more subdued today. Many of us may be questioning whether this prophet who set a city in turmoil 2000 years ago could ever resolve the pandemic turmoil that has shaken our own towns and cities today. We want to believe that Christ lives on, that Christ will be our champion today despite the months of deadly battles that still lie ahead.

But like us, even in Jerusalem on that historic day, the disciples of Jesus struggled to understand. They fumbled and denied. They betrayed and misunderstood, even as Jesus marched to his missional moment of crucifixion. At that parade of palms with a donkey processional for the King of the Jews, a spontaneous crowd shouted with joy, while others wondered what all the fuss was about. None of them could have predicted how it would end, just a few days later. Even the disciples, obedient in following Jesus, but full of shortcomings of their own, were never fully prepared for the suffering that would come. They did their best to make sense of the turn of events, and so do we.

Jesus enters Jerusalem and makes his way to the cross for us, to save us, fully knowing our shortcomings and failures. He came *because* of those shortcomings and failures. He knew how much the people needed him then, and how much we still need him now.

Even in our dismay over all that we have lost in these last few weeks, our church gatherings, our palm waving, our handshakes and hugs, we can rest assured that Jesus has come to meet us where we are, and help us move forward with our lives. We have lost so much so fast: our work, our livelihoods, and our freedom to travel and gather with friends. Our whole world is in turmoil, stirred up, and disrupted. We ask for an end of illness and restoration of our way of life.

Jesus enters at this exact time, to bring his healing presence and merciful grace into our lives. Jesus enters our broken places, where illness, injustice, and upheaval breed. Just as Jesus entered Jerusalem, and Jesus enters our hearts today, he brings healing and wholeness, forgiveness and mercy, grace upon grace, to a broken people, then as now.

Nothing can stop Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Nothing can stop the coming of the Son of God. Soon the crowds who shouted “Hosanna!” will disappear. His closest friends will abandon him. All will seem lost and beyond redemption for a little while, for three long days when time stood still. Like our days of shelter in place, that seem to last forever, and yet pass quickly one by one. Finally, the day will come when life begins anew, when Christ destroys death, and nothing, not even a global pandemic, can stop the life everlasting, the coming of Easter, Christ’s ultimate destination, for the salvation of all of us.

So despite our grieving for all that we have lost in this terrible spring of 2020, we can celebrate this Palm Sunday – shouting loud Hosannas, for Jesus has come to lift our spirits, and wipe away our tears, to forgive all our mistakes and destroy everything that is evil. He brings turmoil to the city, and disruption to our lives, in a way that promises new growth, and restorative joy – if only we can believe it, if only we can be patient in our waiting, if only we can remember the unstoppable power of God’s love in our lives.

Amen.