Worship: Palm Sunday, Year A, April 5, 2020

United Protestant Church of Morgan Park

INTRODUCTION

*God’s peace to you from United Protestant Church of Morgan Park in Duluth, Minnesota, here on this Palm Sunday. The day He enters Jerusalem. It’s days like today, and the days to follow, that we begin to miss our rituals. Normally we cheer, waving palms in the air as we sing. “All Glory Laud and Honor, to Thee, Redeemer, King.”*

*Normally the choir would be singing: “The King…is coming! The King is coming.” But…you are at home, as you have been for many days, socially isolating for the sake of the common good. I know many of you would rather be here, sitting in these pews with those palms and those songs… But still, I invite you, to take this moment, relax your minds and open your hearts and welcome this scripture and reflection.*

*…And as we share this online, there’s a hope I have that somebody views this that isn’t familiar with the church, and is presently wondering what kind of people we are. If that is you, know this: when the health of our community permits us to do so, the doors of this church are open to anyone, and we reserve any judgment of class or culture or race or sexuality or behavior all for God… Here at United Protestant Church we’re across the spectrum in lifestyles, values, politics—we go from Bernie to Trump. But…all are welcome. See, we’ve been taught by Jesus that we are a people of Love and that God loves every human soul…and so do we. Or, as the familiar phrase in the United Church of Christ goes: “Jesus didn’t turn people away, neither do we.”*

SCRIPTURE

**Luke 19:28-40**

After he 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."

SERMON: **“Oh Jesus, When?”**

“Oh Jesus, poor boy, when was it you saw, clearly and irrevocably, just where you were headed?[[1]](#footnote-0)”

That line is from a poem by Mary Oliver—a poem called “Roses” in her book White Pine. It is, perhaps, a bit out of context here, for in this poem she’s writing about her own experience of poverty…but as I sat with this week’s Gospel reading—a familiar story for many of us to be sure—*this* was the line… repeated in my head over and over as I walked with the text—here, as we read the passage that liturgically marks our entrance into the events of Holy Week: “Oh Jesus, poor boy, when was it you saw…just where you were headed?”

And this poem of Mary Oliver’s is sandwiched in her book between writings about a neighbor who is sick and a possum playing dead – as with so many poems, the dominant image isn’t what the poem is about, but functions as a window through which we may find—or rediscover—simple, human truth.

Poor boy… when was it you saw…

Friends, I share this to tell you that I’m reading this season of our Christian year *like poetry*.

(I’m walking through the woods, patiently accepting the slow arrival of spring in the songs of the birds or the fresh hints of green—or along the shoreline as the ice slowly fades and the colors of the rocks return)

I’m reading this weeks lectionary—this familiar story of “Palm Sunday” – and I’m waving my palms in the air and laying them on the ground as a way to find it: simple, human truth.

Truth is, we like to wave the palms, high in the air as we sing and shout Hosanna! “God Saves” – You see, Ladies and Gentlemen our hero has arrived! He’s coming into town like the main character from a movie, the protagonist, the superhero—ready to do the deed that needs to be done. The third day! Death be not proud! Hosanna!

--Sound familiar?

See, Easter’s coming, the resurrection. It is different this year without the lilies, the anthem. We won’t have to wear our nice dresses and suits and will have to sing to ourselves *“Christ the Lord is Risen to-dayyy”—*We won’t be eating pancakes in the fellowship hall…the smell of ham in the oven for family dinner, the jelly beans and chocolate and (if we’re really throwing caution to the wind in celebration) those sugar-crusted marshmallow “Peeps”-- Spring in all of its pastel glory… is different this year.

There’s a darker cloud over us…one of fear and uncertainty. But I personally think it is fitting, because here I am: as he comes into town, repeating the line over and over again “Oh Jesus, poor boy, when was it you saw, clearly, and irrevocably, where you were headed?”

Friends, today, we lay the palms down. We spread our cloaks along the road. In honor, yes, but let us soften this man’s path and make his way easier… he hasn’t died yet. Hasn’t been executed. Hasn’t met the fate of his ministry--

“Oh Jesus, poor boy…” Where *are* you going?

See, Marcus Borg and John Crossan create a powerful image for us in their book *The Last Week.* They set up a scene where at the very same timeon the other side of town, another procession is going on… here comes the Governor, and he’s not using the backdoor to the city like Jesus did but throwing the gates of grandeur wide open with soldiers, warhorses, and chariots[[2]](#footnote-1). [This is the military parade through the capital city that dictators are so fond of]

—and politically, he is savvy…Pontius Pilot knows it’s Passover. He’s coming in strong to remind these Jewish people that if they start anything, they will be crushed into he ground like so much dirt we try to cover with our palms. Now *there’s* the procession.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd (note: we’re referencing our text in Luke instead of Matthew—this story is one that is shared in all four Gospels, but I’m using Luke for the choice of words). In Luke, some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

To be sure, the entry of Jesus is no accidental humility. His entrance and action echoes the words of the prophet Zechariah[[4]](#footnote-3) -- In chapter 9, paraphrased*: “Lo, your king comes to you…humble and riding on a donkey…he will cut off the chariot…the war horse…the battle bow, and shall command peace to the nations…”*

“Oh Jesus, when was it you saw…”

Perhaps it’s a fair statement about the human mind that we think in contrasting terms. If we observe something grand, we are then more capable of observing simplicity. By seeing the strong, we can better understand the weak. By witnessing the true face of poverty, we can understand the gluttony of the rich.

And so it may be with suffering. If the Messiah enters, as is prophesized, and is glorified accordingly, how much more real does his suffering and death become?

“When was it you saw, clearly, and irrevocably…”

You know, as the image of Jesus becomes clearer, so does the simple human truth of this story… He didn’t have to die.

--That’s what I’m thinking, and yes, it flies in the face of a lot of childhood teaching we received about a “divinely ordained Godly plan” that Jesus is here to “carry out Divine will”,

--so therefore it is, to the God I grew up with, that I repeat this line over and over… Oh Jesus…poor boy… you could have preached and teached in the margins for a long time… there are so many others suffering… others blind who’s eyes yearned to be opened, other Lazaruses yearing to hear you call to them “Come Out”…

# And the subject of that Mary Oliver poem—about one’s own poverty—isn’t out of context at all.

You knew where you were heading…

And I’m thinking, Oh Jesus, that you suffered, so that we may see, clearly and irrevocably, what it’s like to be just, and righteous… and *powerless*…

…what it’s like to be innocent, and suffering.

You died, poor boy, so young, and with so much pain, so that we will not turn our backs on the just and the innocent but face them, eyes wide open, bearing witness, laying our palms and our cloaks on the ground announcing the presence of the powerless and suffering.

You died, poor boy, so that we will not change the channel when the newsreel tells us of modern day war-horses slaughtering innocents, of modern day governors driving fear through the powerless with authoritarian might. You died so that we will not avoid the thirsty, the malnourished, the starving, that have been pushed down the dreadful slope of poverty.

You died that we may see these simple, human truths…

…and not rest until the suffering is over. That we will never sit back contented in the Easter of our kingdom, until Good Friday is over.

See, when we sing “all glory laud and honor”… can we hear (as John Rollefson[[5]](#footnote-4) puts it in one commentary for this week) that our entrance into Holy Week is not a frivolous Fourth of July parade with palms instead of flags? “All Glory Laud and Honor” sings more authentically as the church’s marching song if we treat it more akin to “we shall overcome” than we might to “my country tis of thee”

For the people shout “hosanna”--“God save us” –reminding us that the stain of division and inequity still permeates the fabric of our existence, impeding our ability to live in peace and threatening our collective well-being.

Poor boy, I picture myself, there in the crowd… and I’m watching you enter the city… and for your poverty I promise to join this triumphal march. For peace and reconciliation become possible when common folk, donkey and colt-riding folk, with uncommon courage, oppose the exclusionary practices and policies of those who ride war-horses and chariots. We sing together, to the one who comes in the name of the lord.

So even you at home, now…I ask that you not forget that Jesus did not enter Jerusalem simply to save you, but to empower you. His ministry on Earth was cut short by the powers that be, but I believe God had a plan, and that plan included Jesus leaving us all-too-soon. In the middle of his ministry. Because God did not want Jesus to do all of the work. And just as he called the disciples, he calls you and I.

So as we enter Holy Week, so different from years in the past, I ask (as I think I do in some form or other *every* week) that you listen for that nudge. That call. That opportunity.

Put it this way: remember when you were younger, and learning something new—a skill or a task or such…you’d watch someone else do it first, with precision and confidence, then hear those words: “ok, now you do it! Your turn!” That balance of anxiety and anticipation…that’s where we’re at as Christians.

Friends, I’m not going to pretend that I know God’s will, but I can tell you how I hear God’s call, and in my life of prayer, and ministry, I am confident that God’s will was not to sit back and let the hero do all of the work. Jesus died…for us…to become people of Christ. “Little Christs” as the diminutive phrase “Christians” translates. And little Christs don’t sit on the sidelines and watch others do the work.

Peace be with you friends.

SONGS:

Now what songs are on your mind?

*“Awake awake to love and work, the lark is in the sky”*

*“We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, soldiers of the cross”*

*“I have decided to follow Jesus…no turning back…no turning back”*

JOYS AND CONCERNS

For Joys and Concerns, I’ll say this: this week is our week… our week as Christians to connect with one another—to check in with one another. This is Holy Week. I know I’ll be calling as many people as I can—sharing prayers and stories and love. I have the list right there on my desk to dive in…and I think we should all be calling as many people as we can this week. I hope, friends, that this week your phone rings off the hook with friends reaching out and checking in, saying: “Hey, we are together, even though we can’t see each other.” I hope we connect. Keep in touch.

PRAYER:

*Holy God, thank you thank you thank you for this amazing story you enter us into this week. For the wisdom of our tradition and the story we repeat and the way you call us to participate and be alive in the ministry of Jesus Christ. God, even if we cannot be together, let that spirit of Pentecost descend on the church that gathers in spirit. We ask your blessing on each and every soul who receives this message. Let them know of your love. Let them know of God’s call. Of God’s work through Jesus. And through Jesus, God’s call to you.*

*Holy God, we face uncertain times. Indeed, there is that dark cloud of uncertainty and fear, but we know, even when isolated in our homes, we are not alone, for not only are you with us, so is the love of each and every soul that worships in your holy name. Sharing this same story.*

*Holy God, the world is hurting, afraid and uncertain. But we know you have the last word, and you call us to be part of that last word…of love, of hope, of resurrection. Be with us Holy God.*

*And we ask a special blessing for those that suffer now. That struggle with mental or physical illness, those in the hospital beds and those working so hard to support the suffering. And be with us all. Let us all hear your last word.*

*And I ask your blessing for this church in this time of transition and uncertainty. Help us to thrive. To keep the fire of our ministry alive. To keep hope in our hearts. And guide us on the path ahead.*

*And now, Holy God, bind us together in this room and across this world, as we share together the prayer that your Son taught us.*

*(THE LORDS PRAYER)*

CLOSING

*Peace be with you friends. We’ll be together next week, and throughout Holy Week. Keep in touch. And know that you are love and that life turns toward the light.*

1. Mary Oliver / “Roses” / White Pine [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. See Borg and Crossin / Last Week (name?) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. there’s no historical evidence that these entrances occurred in synchronicity, [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Zech. 9:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Feasting on the Word (from this point through closing, I lean) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)