

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

The Palm Parade
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Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem-- **Matthew 21: 1-11 NRSV**

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2** saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. **3** If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately.^[a]" **4** This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." **6** The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; **7** they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. **8** A very large crowd^[b] spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" **10** When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" **11** The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." **Holy Wisdom, holy word. Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, on this Palm Sunday, we want to shout Hosanna, and wave palms, and watch the children play outside. This year with the coronavirus pandemic it feels strange to be worshipping from home, instead of gathering together in our sanctuary. Good and gracious God, by some miracle of your grace, pour through me the gift of preaching, that these ordinary words might become tailor made for us. Connect us across the miles, through modern technology and virtual worship so that we can once again be a community of faith, who loves you, who cares for each other, and who serves in your name. We know that you will for we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Our confirmation class is now meeting virtually on Zoom since e-learning began. Sadly there is no pizza or fuzeball, but it doesn't seem to matter because the kids are so excited to see one another. This week I started to feel the wind down to the end of the class. Confirmation is a huge milestone for parents, though I am not always sure youth get that. What will be different after confirmation? I asked. From now on, you will be an adult member of the church with all of its benefits and responsibilities. From now on your vote will count as much as mine. They look perplexed. From now on, it is

YOUR decision whether you come to church on Sunday morning or not. Their eyes open wide, they sit up straight. Now I have their full attention. And then the most important question of all comes—Does faith matter? What difference will faith make in my life? *That is the question I want to look at with you today.*

This year everything is turned upside down. There is a giant elephant in the room named Covid 19, and to pretend that it is otherwise is ridiculous. Our entire world feels like it has come to a screeching halt as we all

“shelter in place” trying to “flatten the curve” so we can help save lives, our own and others. One question keeps coming up in almost every conversation I have as I reach out to folks and see if they are doing okay: How can my faith help in a crisis?

Friends, I believe this from the bottom of my heart--faith matters immensely. Faith directs how we act towards others, whether we forgive those who are closest to us when they step on our toes or blow up at us especially in times like these, whether we forgive ourselves when we don't get it quite right either. Faith guides the words we choose. Faith directs our actions. But it does so much more. It gives us calm and confidence to face the unknown. Let me say that again: faith gives us calm and confidence to face the unknown. Faith is our North Star when life is murky. Right now life is very, very murky.

The Reverend Dr. Gregory Sterling, the Dean of Yale Divinity School who is a wonderfully accomplished New Testament scholar and pastor for many years before he became Dean, said the following in his letter to the YDS community last week:

Faith neither wishes for the impossible nor unrealistically ignores the fact that tragedy can happen to me and my family. ... Faith is the quiet confidence that no matter what we face, God will give us strength to face it....But faith is more than confidence in God and God's love; faith is a life motivated to serve on the basis of that confidence. -*“Why Faith Matters”* Dean Sterling, 3/22/2020.

What does a faith that matters look like now? It means praying for those who are ill and scared and suffering. It means praying for medical workers and all who give care. It is praying for those who are working day and

night to discover a cure. It is helping those who are economically disadvantaged and those who have lost their jobs and suffer in silence. It means sharing what we have with others. It means sacrificing our own plans and staying home so that we can keep others safe. It means reaching out to loved ones and acquaintances so we can make sure people are not feeling isolated, anxious, overwhelmed. It means making sure those in our community of faith and beyond get food, medication, and the medical care they need. Does faith matter? Yes, it matters immensely. Make no mistake your faith defines who you are. (Rev. Dr. Greg Sterling, *“Why Faith Matters”*)

Your faith is always there, but it seems that we lean on our faith most when we are walking into the unknown. Faith is the calm and confidence that helps you chart a course forward. Faith does not run and hide. Faith faces a change in employment or health crisis knowing it will be a long haul, and it will be painful, but God will be with us, come what may.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. I think many people would prefer to think of Palm Sunday as a dress rehearsal for Easter. They would rather go from the Palm Parade to the Easter Parade and skip Good Friday and the cross completely.

Writer Anne Lamott said somewhat irreverently: Sometimes I think “I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to ... the Easter Bunny outside the open tomb; everlasting life and a basket full of chocolates.” (Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p. 160). Who doesn't love chocolates? Yet when we move from a childlike faith to an adult faith, we have to leave the Easter basket with the chocolates at home and take another look.

In megachurches on TV, you will notice that the cross is completely absent. A lucite pulpit is there, but not the cross. Theologian and preacher Will Willimon explains, “crosses don’t sell unless they are on gold jewelry. What sells is positivity, success, and prosperity.”

Theologically the cross is the central affirmation of Christianity. God Almighty, ruler of the universe, became Love in human form, to be with us, to show us how to live, to die for us. So you see, there is no way around the cross. The cross is central to the story.

The Gospel story this morning from Matthew begins in Galilee a poor and rural fishing village that is 110 miles north of Jerusalem, the City of David, where King Solomon first built the Temple around 957 BCE. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate is in charge of the city. Every Jewish person was to make the trek to Jerusalem at least once in their life to Jerusalem for the Passover. The trip took several days on foot from Galilee. The disciples and Jesus were in a village called Bethphage when the story begins.

Jesus asks two of the disciples to go and grab a donkey and a colt. A whole group of people are making their way toward Jerusalem when Jesus begins to ride the donkey. Matthew is so intent on us making the connection between Jesus riding the donkey and the prophecy in Zechariah, that he quotes the Hebrew Scriptures: “Lo, your king comes to you: humble and lowly, riding on a donkey, and a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Onlookers start to talk, whispers at first. Someone shouts “Hosanna,” then someone else does, someone chants “Ho’sa’nah” until it catches on. People throw down their cloaks. This is the Palm Parade that rode into the capital city, a shabby bunch of pilgrims from the fishing village of Galilee.

On the other side of town, Pontius Pilate has his own parade. The contrast is unmistakable. Pilate rides on a giant horse, soldiers are marching. There is metal armour, leather, spears, an imperial show of force. Jesus surrounds himself with sinners, outcasts, the blind, the poor and the lame. Jesus’ message is love. Pilate’s message is power. Do you see the difference?

It doesn’t take long for Pilate to get word of Jesus of Galilee and his entourage. Jesus the well-known rabbi, a miracle worker, a healer of the blind and the lame, had come to celebrate the Passover and the news spread like wildfire. Now the story unwinds quickly. The disciples gather in an Upper Room. There was a footwashing, a supper which involved bread and wine. They go to a garden to pray. There is an arrest. A trial. A cross.

And there on a hill called Golgotha just outside the city, in a sign of public humiliation, Jesus is crucified between two criminals. Jesus gives up his spirit and breathes his last. After Jesus’ body is laid in the tomb, the cross is no longer a symbol of Roman cruelty, but a symbol of God’s unconditional love for us. ***Theologian Garry Wills wrote, the cross is “God’s way of saying that no matter what horrors we face or hell we descend to, God is coming with us.” No matter what horrors we face or hell we descend to, God is coming with us. (Garry Wills, What Jesus Meant, Feasting on the Word, Matthew.)***

Today we celebrate the Palm Parade. The beginning of Holy Week. The story is familiar. A donkey, a foot washing, a Passover meal, a cross, a tomb. Somewhere in the story, the cross changes from a cruel form of Roman humiliation to God going to any and every depth to love and save us. I know the child within you may want to go straight for the chocolate bunny, but the

theologian and the minister in me wants to tell you please don't miss the cross. If you miss the cross, you won't understand or appreciate the Glory of Easter morning. George Post wrote me an email the other day and said, "Lord, give us strength in this difficult time, but please bring on the Glory!" May it be so, may it be so.