

“Take Refuge in the Lord”

Courtney Steininger
First Presbyterian Church
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Verse 8 of today’s Psalm tells us “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans.” Honestly, this is a pretty accusatory line for us humans, which is probably why it wasn’t included in the lectionary’s scripture selections this week. But it is crucial to remember this Palm and Passion Sunday. Please pray with me:

Creator of All Worlds, who stretched forth the heavens and encircled them with your steadfast love, surround us here with evidence of your saving power and your concern for each one of us. You have given us breath and spirit; grant us now your light that we may see more clearly and follow more faithfully. In the name of our King, Jesus, our Emmanuel. Amen.

Today is the first day of Holy Week, the most sacred week of our Christian year. And it begins with a protest march into Jerusalem. Just as people today hold up their cardboard signs declaring their most deeply held beliefs, so too did the people in Jesus’ day lift their palms in protest against the Roman Empire. This was not an Easter parade. Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem was a resistance march of love. Indeed, it was a counter procession, because at the same time our Lord, God’s beloved son rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, there was an imperial procession on the other side of the city. This was a yearly, full military display at Passover, meant to remind the people that rebellion would be quashed. Thus, Jesus’ march of love was a committed public action, which called out the Roman imperial leaders who had money in their pockets, because they were complicit with an empire made rich by violence and war. When the people shouted, “Hosanna in the highest, Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”, they were declaring that Jesus was their King, a ruler who didn’t have blood on his hands, a King who knew that Love stands in solidarity with the suffering of others. They declared their king someone who had power that no emperor could even begin to imagine. And they were the first adopters. They believed in Jesus’ message of love even before he died for their sins, even before his all-powerful resurrection. Jesus had already shown them that love is powerful enough to strengthen what is broken and heal what is fragmented. They had already experienced Emmanuel, God with them, who stood with them in pain and darkness.

Today, I keep using our name for Jesus that we usually only use at Christmas, Emmanuel, meaning God with us. A friend and I were discussing the etymology of the word “welcome” the other day. We are so used to saying welcome, that we only think about it as a nicety and sentiment that we are glad someone has come. But the word, in parts, well and come, is a full recognition of that person’s journey, who they are, their history, their trauma, their triumphs, and all that they are. So, when the people welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem, waving branches of palms, thanking Jesus for all that he is, all that he was, and all that he will be. This welcome, with their palms instead of their signs made with sharpies, was the way that they took refuge in the Lord, instead of humans. Because as we all know the rest of Jesus’ holy week journey, humans are fallible.

The march of events during Holy Week troubles us, for the tragedy seems to be repeated down to our own day. Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified when the chief priests shouted for his crucifixion. On March 16, 8 people were killed in the Atlanta spa shootings, 6 of whom were Asian women. On Monday, there was a mass shooting in Colorado. On Friday, 2 people died, and 8 people were injured in a shooting in Virginia Beach. As we celebrate love flowing in the streets of Jerusalem, we are reminded of the passion story. Holy Week is about darkness, where we try to be with Jesus, holding onto His Love in the midst of darkness. IF we welcome him into our hearts, we know that God is with us, Emmanuel. We must take refuge in him, which we can only do as we stand with and by each other. We must be in community, here at FPCNC and beyond. And we must hold near to us the words of Rev. Sally Howard who reminds us that “to follow Christ through the path of Holy Week is to seek out the stories of others and hear them, in such a way that their pain diverts us and moves us and alters our choices.” She continues that “To follow Jesus on the path of self-offering love, is to Amplify the voices that empire powers try to silence.”

We know what these voices are. They are the voices of the suffering, the Asian American Pacific Islander community right now, young Black Lives Matter leaders, and the voice and pain of young people begging us to challenge gun violence. And we know where to find these voices. If we wanted to stay within our own Fairfield County, we know we can travel no more than 45 minutes to Newtown Ct to find those who are still in pain and darkness because of the Sandy Hook shooting.

Holy Week is our opportunity to sit in all of this. And I invite you to sit in some of that pain, but there is still a reason that our Psalm reminds us today that God’s steadfast love endures forever. We are reminded that we can take refuge in the Lord because when we are there, we can be called to action.

As I move into the second half of my sermon, I want to first just acknowledge the role that Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner has on basically everything I am about to say. The bulletin insert that many of you have takes his language as well.

Buechner talks a lot about the idea of vocation, which comes from the Latin word *vocare*, meaning “to call.” The important thing here is that “Calling” assumes a caller, and as Buechner notes, for us Christians, this Caller is the living God in whom we take refuge. Hearing this call is difficult because we must isolate God’s voice in a cacophony of voices. He writes “There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.”

This Holy Week, as we are forced to come face to face with the passion narrative, let’s try to isolate God’s voice together. Let’s try to find the things to which we are called. I am not suggesting that you should radically change your lives, but I invite you to radically change your hearts. To listen to the ways that the Holy Spirit speaks in you and through you. Find the exciting peaks as well as the deep, dark, valleys. If there is only one metaphor we can take from Holy Week, it is that of life, of the high highs of welcome and resurrection, and the deepest darkest valleys of pain, loss, and grief.

Those highs are our deepest gladness's. Those lows are the world's deepest hunger. And Buechner writes that "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." And that place can only be the cross.

Bonhoeffer reminds us that the "One who calls is not a God who creates and then leaves us to figure it out on our own, but a living Lord who calls us anew, daily, to himself." And that is important because in this most sacred of weeks, that call is particularly loud. Life does not exist without death, we are reminded of this in the seasons, in the plants, in the decaying of compost and the resurrection of spring. And we are reminded of that at Holy Week. The living Lord calls us anew because the living Lord loves us and dies for us.

So, taking refuge in the Lord also means praying at the foot of the cross. When you picture yourselves at the foot of the Cross, what do you see? Take this time to meditate on Christ's broken body, broken for you and I, broken because of you and I. At the foot of the Cross, what would you say to Jesus? What would you want him to say to you? And maybe you are speechless, which is just as valid.

Let's take a time of silence together, taking refuge in the Lord. If it is helpful for you, think on the prompts in the bulletin insert. For those of you in the sanctuary today, if you feel so called, go ahead, and make a sign that declares your deepest held beliefs. Pray if you want, meditate if you want. Stand up and stretch if you want. But remember that the Holy Spirit is here, among us and working through whatever we do.

Carry with you into the world the mind of Christ, who forsook equality with God in humble obedience. In self-emptying love Christ became a servant so we might know God's glory. So, take refuge in the Lord, for there you shall find the place where your deepest gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. And that is how you are called to do and be, in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ. This Holy Week let us remind that our times are in God's hands. Do not fear, even when our strength fails. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.