Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020
Rev. Sandy Ward

Matthew 21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

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." 
 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 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.”

I remember living in Ames, Iowa in the spring of 1995. We had a 2 year old son, and our 2 month old son. It was a lovely weekend, and we decided that it would be fun to take a family outing to Pella, IA - a wholesome town of Dutch descent, and home of the Pella window factory. On this particular day the town was holding its annual tulip festival.
and the tulip parade was part of the festivities. And, who doesn’t love a parade, right?

We loaded up the car and drove over to Pella, then unloaded strollers and diaper bags and set up camp on a vacant curb to enjoy the parade. But somehow we managed to be right in the spot where the band started up, horns, drums, cymbals, and my sleeping 2 month old was sent right into a frightful fit of terror.

Well, I don’t imagine there were any loud bands in the original Palm Sunday parade that honored Jesus riding into town. In fact, I think the parade our scripture describes in Matthew 21 was rather an impromptu gathering of disciples, and followers who all assembled at the Mount of Olives where they could see Jerusalem on the other side of the Kidron Valley.

I think they gathered there to take a pause. Jesus knew what was before him, but his followers did not. But they knew that Jesus was something special. They had come from as far away as Galilee, “listening to his teachings, astounded by his authority, witnessing his capacity to heal the sick; and fed by his hand that could multiply just a few loaves and fishes”. (Audrey West, Feasting on the Word, p. 153), Through their
observations they have wondered if Jesus might be the Son of David, and now, they are affirming what their hearts have known. Jesus has come to the Mount of Olives, calling for his donkey colt. And now they know this to be a fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, who said, “Your King is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey”. The crowd gathers with an enthusiasm that comes with knowing that Jesus is the Messiah.

You know….in light of our current world status, I am reading this beloved scripture with new eyes. I don’t just see a group of happy folks supporting their leader and anticipated savior. I see a crowd of people who are gathering to absorb a sacred time and space that is situated around the man who is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is in their midst and they realize this ground is holy, this is a time to savor the undeniable presence of God in their world.

I feel the conviction of a gathering of people who have found truth in this moment. Truth in the scriptures, truth in the songs and words of the prophets who have come before them. Truth in the fulfillment of God’s word and promise to send a savior.

I admire the deep courage of this group of people, who absorb and embrace all that Jesus has done and all that Jesus is. Regular people
displaying uncommon courage to stand by this man who is nothing like the messiah they expected. This messiah who redefines the concept of Lord - not a Lord wielding oppressive power and a cruel might, but a Lord who displays his might through servanthood, humility, peacemaking, mercy, grace, compassion and generosity.

I am blessed and encouraged by these people who believe that Jesus represents hope for a new life, an abundant life, not in terms of creature comforts, but in terms of a kingdom where humanity flourishes because neighbors love God and love each other.

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On Feb. 27 of this year, I ate dinner with my church family, and led an Ash Wed. worship service with about 20 people. Several more people came in later for choir practice and, down the hall a recovery group gathered. We were hearing about this virus that was overcoming China, it had moved into a King County nursing home, and the headlines spoke of the first person in California to contract the virus. Little did we know this virus would be our Lenten wilderness.

As the first week of Lent became the second, our reality was changing rapidly. We have been plunged into a new reality. It is a new
reality that has forced me, and my colleagues to do ministry in new ways. It is a reality that has forced my congregation into new patterns of working from home, become home-school parents, and shop for groceries online. And it is a reality that has needed all of us to do our part, recognizing that there are no racial, gender, or economic biases in who this virus attacks.

This is a wilderness that has caused me to take a pause. I’m finding that in the midst of searching my way through this mishmash of unknown territory, in the midst of learning new things, in the midst of being bombarded with overwhelming news of infection and death, I have had to do some deep contemplation. And that contemplation is my way of taking a pause to reconnect to what is most important in life. What is my life about? Who am I connected to? What do I stand for, and am I living my best life everyday?

These folks, gathered at the Mount of Olives that day, I think they had contemplated some of these very things. Their world was very different than ours, but, in their desire to follow Jesus, they wanted their life to count for something.
What does it mean to live your best life? A life that is whole, in body, mind and spirit? If this virus, and the isolation surrounding it, has reminded me of anything, it is that my purpose in life is not just about fulfilling my immediate desires for entertainment and creature comforts. In fact, the very concept of being an integrated whole human being, has to include working through some suffering, some inconvenience, some discomfort, so that we can think in the bigger picture about how we can live in ways that are good for the whole of humanity. Living in ways that cut through our human imposed barriers, and provide access for all people to those very things that we all need to survive and thrive… things like food, housing, healthcare, education to name a few.

Do you think it was comfortable for Jesus, or his followers, to walk boldly into Jerusalem with the person that would disrupt the authority of the Roman rulers of the day? Do you think it was convenient for this crowd to align themselves with a king who rode into town on a donkey, while the rest of the city aligned themselves with an emperor who rode in on a steed?

In my pause, I’ve had to realize once again, that God’s ways are not the ways of this world. Jesus was a challenge to the world’s power. And right about now, we need a challenge to the power of our world - because
our world’s power can’t do it alone. The power that Jesus represents, the power of an almighty, all knowing and all powerful God, is hope.

This week I saw hope in a video of two little boys in China, running into each other’s arms, after months of separation; I heard words of encouragement from Bill Gates, who is funding research and relief, and who said, “It’s not too late to flatten the curve of this virus”. And I read about a restaurant owner who could pay her employees for two more weeks because her landlord declared a “no rent April”.

As Christians, people who follow Jesus it is right that we look for hope. We can offer hope through compassion with a note or call to someone who is alone, or vulnerable, or grieving. We can express gratitude for all that God has provided, especially for those on the front lines, who are giving selflessly of themselves for our well-being. And we can pray - for our world, for those who are sick, for our leaders. We can do our part to bring healing to a hurting world. We can stay home. Maybe we sew face masks, maybe we donate food to the foodbank, maybe we sing or play music to remind others that God is here and we are putting hope into action.
In the week between Palm Sunday and Easter, Jesus would walk through a new wilderness - one of betrayal, and suffering, and loss of human life. It would not be a happy ending on Friday. But on Saturday, everyone would take a pause. There would be holy space. And new hope would emerge on Sunday, when the resurrection of Christ would tell the world of God’s love and faithfulness that is more powerful than death.

This is the week we call Holy Week - the last week of Lent, but by no means the last week of our wilderness journey. If this journey is overwhelming you, I pray that you will reach out - to a friend, family member, or your pastor.

What Jesus did as the messiah, he did for all of humanity. When our lives belong to God, we can know that hope exists even in our wilderness and our isolation. Lives that belong to God are not wasted - they are not lost. Our wilderness helps us recognize God’s grace given to us, and the grace we need to give others. This is a time we can seek to be whole and holy.

May you know the grace of God’s loving and saving spirit this week. May you walk through this wilderness, pausing to experience the hope and
new life we can look forward to at Easter. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

References: