

A Palm Sunday 4.5.20  
Matthew 21:1-17  
Focus Statement: Jesus is brave.

Happy Palm Sunday! First off, let me just say that making the Palm Sunday procession video was like the most fun thing I've done in this Stay Home, Stay Safe time. Thank you to everyone who sent in videos and photos, it was so great to see everyone's creativity and smiling faces. Or serious faces, some of you are very serious processors. If you missed the chance and still want to participate, I'll still take videos, photos, whatever. I still have Tish and David's music, we can make more procession videos.

Since this is not a normal Palm Sunday, I want to break with my own Palm/Passion Sunday tradition, and stay on the palm theme for the service. Some of you may remember from past years, I always want to include the reading of the passion narrative from whatever Gospel we're in as the Gospel reading for this Sunday. We read the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the social hall, then we raise our palms, process into the sanctuary, and then we almost immediately plunge from that into the passion story. The result is on a normal Palm Sunday we've gone from All, Glory, Laud, and Honor to the choir singing O Sacred Head, Now Wounded in the span of about forty-five minutes. Which is crazy, but there is on your normal Palm Sunday a method to my madness. Which I'll share with you now. The reason I have us do that is because I want us to get a sense of just how fast things unraveled at that first Easter. Holy Week is a time so steeped in ritual and tradition, we all know what is going to happen and when and where, that I always want to try on that first day of this most holy week, to remind us of how chaotic it all felt.

But this year, I feel like we aren't going to need help remembering what chaos feels like. We've been feeling chaos every day. All you have to do is turn on the TV or open the paper to see a world that feels like it's spinning out of control. Michigan reported fifteen-hundred new confirmed cases of COVID-19 yesterday. Which is actually good news, because that's five hundred less new cases than were reported on Friday. But still fifteen-hundred new cases is a lot of new cases. Michigan also reported sixty deaths yesterday. And on Friday Calhoun County experienced our first death from the illness, a resident of Advantage Living Center on Wagner. Five other residents and four staff members have also tested positive for the virus. And while I don't know the person, their death hit home for me because I know the Advantage Living Center. It's been several years since I've been there, but Mary lived there for a while, and I visited regularly. I knew the staff; I knew the residents. I forgot the code and got myself locked in the memory care unit more times than I care to admit.

All this to say, we know chaos. We know fear. We will have ample opportunities in the weeks and months to come, to reflect on the experience of the disciples that first Easter morning, locked in an upper room, alone, afraid, grieving, and wondering what was going on. So this morning, rather than rushing to the passion, I want us to spend some time just sitting with the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and reflecting on the tremendous bravery that Jesus displays in this story.

So to set the scene for us a little bit. In Matthew's account, this was Jesus' first time in Jerusalem during his public ministry. John, who's account we've been reading throughout

Lent, has Jesus back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem several times over the course of his ministry, but for Matthew this is it. Jesus came to Jerusalem with one specific action in mind, he came to fulfill the words he had spoken about his impending death.

Here's something else to keep in mind as we read this story about Jesus' so-called "triumphal entry," as a Roman occupied territory, the people of Jerusalem were well versed in triumphal entries. Triumphal entries were precisely the tool Rome used to remind the people of Jerusalem that they had been conquered, and Rome had the might to do that again whenever it should so choose. In fact, we know Pilate is in town, since Jesus will meet with him in just a couple days. Pilate was in town because of the Passover. With so many people coming from all over the countryside to gather for the holiday, Rome wanted Pilate, and the show of imperial power and grand imperial procession that accompanied him, to remind the people that Rome was in charge.

So Pilate entered into the city through the main city gates, resplendent in all the pomp and circumstance of the empire, astride a mighty stallion decked out armor. Accompanying Pilate would have been a full regiment of Roman soldiers, parading through streets lined with the wealthy and elite, waving banners and shouting chants of praise and power.

And around this time, some theologians offer even at the same time, a very different parade was taking place as Jesus entered one of the side gates of the city. In contrast to Pilate's stallion, Jesus was riding "on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." And lining the streets of Jesus' entry was not the wealthy and powerful. It was the crowds of the poor, the

sick, and the hungry who had been journeying with him on the road. This rag-tag bunch of sinners and outcasts did not wave banners or blast trumpets. Instead they cut branches from trees and laid their own cloaks on the ground. They shouted the words of one of the processional psalms that pilgrims had chanted for ages, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Hosanna, save us, this religious "hurrah" is a direct mockery of Pilate's entrance. Many of you know that snarky flash mob protests are one of my favorite things. This is what that was. This was Jesus and his followers thumbing their nose at the Roman Imperial Army, saying you, Rome, are not in control. You think you are, with your might and your strength, but here is what real kingship looks like. Here is what real power looks like.

And the text tells us that "the whole city was in turmoil" at this action. This word "turmoil" is a great one, because it shows up three other times in Matthew's Gospel. It was the response of Herod when he heard of Jesus' birth "and he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." It was the response of the world when "the earth shook, and the rocks were split" as Jesus "breathed his last." And it was the response of the guards who "shook and appeared like dead men" at the appearance of an angel announcing Christ's resurrection. This is a word that encompasses both fear and awe. It is the response of one who has experienced the glory of the almighty, and the mix of wonder and fear that such an encounter holds.

What I love about the upside down nature of this display of power is that it is at its heart so simple. Jesus didn't perform some great miracle to announce his presence. He didn't do

what was expected of a Messiah and ride in on a stallion, leading a host of armies behind him. The act that announced the event that would upend the entire universe and bring death itself to its knees was a parade of misfits welcoming a dusty preacher precariously balanced on the back of a donkey. Those looking for power in the form of Rome missed the display of the Almighty taking place on the edges.

Dear friends in Christ, what this passage reminded me of this week is that power and bravery do not have to be grand acts. We're all looking for something to do right now, some way to help. And for many of us, maybe for most of us, the grandest, most noble acts we can do are the simplest. Travis and I stopped by Territorial Brewing Company last week to pick up a growler and support the local economy and I quipped to the bartender about saving the world through takeout. We'd been joking back and forth about his carefully sanitized pens, but at this remark he turned and got serious with me, "you don't know what you folk stopping in here and buying something means to us. For us, this really matters." One of my neighbor kids made individually wrapped bags of popcorn with shark facts on them. There was a story on the news last night about the Woolridge neighborhood putting signs in their windows thanking the workers at Bronson Hospital.

And here's another amazing piece of good news in this text. These crowds who are displaying this incredible act of bravery, who are part of this upending of the forces of death and destruction, they have no idea what they're doing. They aren't great superheroes of faith either. They're people, like you and me. People who we know in just a

couple of days are going to totally screw this whole thing up. And yet, that does not stop Jesus from using them to reveal his glory, and from dying for them so that they might live.

So friends, in this Holy Week like you have never experienced before, and in this time like no other, may you be brave. May you revel in the simple acts of bravery that are making such a difference in this time. May you stay home, may you get take out, may you call a lonely neighbor, give a donation to a nonprofit supporting the most vulnerable, take a walk and wave at others—from a safe social distance, of course.

May you be brave, but most importantly, may you be gentle. Know that none of us know how do to this thing well. It's ok to be scared. It's ok to be angry. It's ok to be not productive. It's ok to stay home and watch way too much Netflix. Whatever we do and however we are, none of this stops the promise of this Holy Week. The promise that God is with us, no matter what, not because of who we are and not because of what we do, but simply because that is who God is. Not our mistakes, not our doubts, not even death itself will keep God from God's people. The first Easter didn't happen in a church. The first Easter happened when God's people were scattered, alone, and afraid. God is here, dear people. Thanks be to God. Amen.