

Blessed is the One
Mark 11:1-11
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Irondequoit United Church of Christ
March 28, 2021



“Like splendid palm branches,
we are strewn in the Lord’s path.”
Latin Antiphon

Today we begin a journey that holds within it the fullness of our human story; the highs and lows, the hopes and the fears. In the span of just seven days, we will do it all: we will praise, process, break bread, wash feet, make promises, deny, betray, condemn, abandon, grieve, despair, disbelieve, and celebrate. The knowledge that Christ’s entry led directly to his Crucifixion looms ahead.

Holy week begins in Jerusalem during the beginning of Pesach, Passover, when everyone who could make it pilgrimages to Jerusalem to remember their history of being liberated and saved. The city swelled from 20,000 up to 100,000. These Jewish pilgrims come to pray that God will come again to restore prosperity to his people being trampled underfoot.

Jesus knew full well the spirit of this feast and this longing. He also knew full well that he would be cheered and then betrayed. He wore a painful smile. The enthusiastic crowds sang out Hosanna, Save us Now, with both joyous expectation and desperation that the Messiah had finally come to rescue his people from imperial power and a brutal occupation.

It’s a scene of jubilation; full of shouting including street theater like the conquering king riding in on a donkey while the Roman representative, Pontius Pilate, across town rode in on a war chariot through West Gate.

Blessed is the One that weeps
for us and with us
when we have lost our way.
Blessed is the One that comes
towards us in majesty and humbleness
down that ancient, twisted path

straight into our gated cities,
locked up homes and hearts.
Blessed is the one that hears
our shouts of joy
then endures our chants of betrayal.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. In the beginning the crowds who had been singing Hosanna, "Save us" acted like they knew who he was or rather they acted like a people ready to be saved by a victorious king. They missed the symbolism of the donkey and so do most of us. And of course, we don't link these hosannas to the burnt palms that will become ashes for next year's Ash Wednesday.

Furthermore, most importantly, most of us don't want a Jesus who has come to turn over our tables, who calls us out of our comfortable hiding places, or who will test and judge us. And truth be told, we Protestants prefer a Jesus which is light on the Passion Story, light on all that blood and suffering. We go from the joy of Palm Sunday to the silent despair of Maundy Thursday with perhaps a prayer around 3:00 PM on Friday, to a quiet Saturday, to a sunrise celebration of "He is risen." We don't really want to hear about that event in the Temple when he turned over the tables and threw out the money changers; we don't want to admit how we too have betrayed him with our silence as he walked by carrying that heavy cross, or how we have become complicit with the powers and principalities of our day who continue to squeeze and oppress the poor and marginalized; the vulnerable and elderly. This is not the part of the story we wish to focus on.

One of the gifts of living in Jerusalem was that I got to celebrate three versions of each Christian feast---the Orthodox or Eastern Church, the Western Church, and the Armenian Church. One year the Eastern and Western churches celebrated Easter at the same time. It was chaotic but wonderful. Christian pilgrims came from all over the world to relive this tragic part of the story of how we went from singing Hosanna to crucify him. Another year, like this year, Easter Sunday and Passover were celebrated on the same day. This was not so wonderful as it restricted the movement of Christian pilgrims into the Old City, giving priority to the Jewish pilgrims.

I remember watching these Christian pilgrims languishing in the hot sun outside Jaffa gate hoping to get in to walk the streets with their heavy crosses singing 'Jesus Remember Me When You Come into Your kingdom.'

Nonetheless, Holy Week was a joyous and busy time to be in the Old City of Jerusalem with its many pilgrims. On Palm Sunday people from all over the world come to process down the Mount of Olives from Bethpage to Lion's Gate to Saint Anne's Cathedral. They come to sing and dance on the narrow pathways waving their beautifully decorated palms. One year we even had a barefoot Jesus come with his white donkey.

When you march down that ancient steep path you see Jerusalem the way you imagine Jesus saw it---gleaming in the distance full of promise and hope, yet also then and now--the seat of power.

One of the places you pass during your walk is the Franciscan church, Dominus Fleuvet, shaped like a giant tear because it is believed to be the spot where Jesus looked out over the city and wept. That view from the church is one of my favorite holy sites as I can imagine him pausing here and weeping not for his fate to come but for our continued lack of understanding about what makes for peace. And so, as it was then, and it is true today. We still don't really get who this nonviolent Jesus was or what he demands of us now. We are still criminalizing political dissent, and persecuting children and their families in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Gaza. By depriving people of their basic human rights which now include covid vaccines and medical care, an occupying power, once again, is repeating a blood history of oppression and violence.

If Jesus were indeed to return to the world, to Jerusalem, this is what he would see---another military occupation mistreating the occupied, another imperial power trying to squash dissent through unjust laws and imprisonment. And Jerusalem, the city of the prophets, still running with the blood of martyrs.

This Palm Sunday there will be no tourists walking down the Mount of Olives. There will be a procession for those who live in Israel and Palestine. Israel has not opened its borders yet so remain in a semi-lockdown state due to the high cases of covid.

But Dear Ones, this doesn't mean we are excused from our spiritual call to accompany Jesus all the way to the cross. In spite of this, Dear Ones, the Passion Story of Jesus' betrayal and suffering still calls us to throw our coats on the ground, to wave our palms, and sing Hosanna today, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord (Psalm 118)." However, it is not only our coats and palms that we must spread under Christ's feet but our very selves, baptized and clothed in Christ's grace, that we must spread like coats under his feet.

Palm Sunday shows how weak we are to follow this donkey riding God who refuses to be in political partisanship and polarization, who loves and includes all. Palm Sunday reminds us that we are invited not only to sing and shout but to accompany all whose lives have become constricted, restricted, or targeted. We are called to stay awake and pray for each other and the planet we are destroying day by day. We are summoned to bear that heavy cross by choosing to live in compassion with those suffering and dying, to see in them Him calling out, weeping, and rising up. And finally, we are called to roll away all the stones that entomb us, to practice resurrection daily. In this world, God's realm has not yet come, though our hearts long for it and our lives incline toward it.