

Cedar Sunday? Say what now?

On Friday I presided at the funeral for Tim Tebbe, a lovely man who had been a long-haul driver for Manitoulin Transport for a great deal of his adult life. He had his own rig which was green and white emblazoned with his name, his son's Timmy and Tyrel's name and his wife Cheryl's name.

About 20 minutes before the service was to begin, there was a convoy of rigs, with Tim's in the front coming down Pine Street hill by the Rec Centre in Sparwood. Across the bumper was a large white banner "In loving memory of Tim Tebbe". Seeing those rigs in formation, driving slowly down the hill and lining up one behind the other in front of the Rec Centre while Tim's rig was driven into the parking lot and parked in a place of honour, was quite a sight to see. I have never seen anything like it before. There were hugs, some tears and a bit of laughter as the crowd dispersed and walked upstairs and into the large hall for Tim's service.

As I watched the procession in amazement I wondered what a protest march for Jesus would look like today?

Back in Jesus' day, the parade that was held in his honour was not really about Jesus. It was a protest march for Pilate who was arriving at the West Gates to the city of Jerusalem. There would have been hundreds of well trained soldiers marching in unison, wearing full Roman regalia. A show of might, of force and one intended to awe and frighten the onlookers.

It would have been a parade of excess, with banners, flags, chariots, chariot drivers, trumpeters, and a throng of marchers. Imagine lots of gold, lots of royal purple. Opulence. Like a Pride Parade with more drag queens and less glitter. Military precision, over the top excess showing who was in command, who had money to spare and who was ultimately responsible for the lives of the onlookers.

The crowd was gathering for the annual Passover celebrations. They had come from far and wide and while required to do this because of their faith, it was also a tremendous money-making venture for the Romans. The sacrificial animals could only be bought in the temple and only official temple currency could be used. The conversion rates would be excessive, and all in the name of the Governor, Pontius Pilate and the Emperor Tiberius.

It would be expected that the community would be out in force, showing their support of Pilate, more from abject terror than true fealty. They would be waving flags and banners of their own, likely purchased from the temple for exorbitant prices. The Governor would expect and in fact, demand to see his people showing their support and love for him.

Being the Governor, Pilate would have had his face on local currency. He would also have had a hand in the inner workings of the Sanhedron. He had a tremendous amount of power and used it willingly, in most circumstances. In most circles Pilate has been vilified and is, in fact, named in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creed. "Suffered under Pontius Pilate" says the Apostles' Creed. "He (Jesus) was crucified under Pontius Pilate" says the Nicene Creed.

There's a lot more to say about Pilate, but that will wait for Good Friday. Watch this space...

Today's reading is about Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. He entered through the East Gates of the City of Jerusalem. To compare and contrast the gatherings...Pilate's official parade had hundreds if not thousands of onlookers and participants, whereas Jesus' likely had a dozen or so followers and less than a hundred onlookers.

Where the mighty and the wealthy shared their opulence and spared no expense, Jesus' parade was very humble yet effective. Jesus followers did not have yards of fabric with gold and purple, but their regular cloaks which they placed on the ground to mock the opulence and excess of the formal parade.

Pilate would have been on a chariot with a driver, behind a large muscular war horse, whereas Jesus, a grown man, was hunched up on a donkey. Certainly not looking very regal or majestic. Matthew's gospel describes Jesus as asking, "you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." Now just imagine the scene...a grown man atop a donkey and her colt. How would he do that? One foot on each of them, standing while holding their reigns? Draped across both of them? Now matter how you imagine the scene, it is comical. Donkeys are nowhere near the size of horses and trying to ride two at the same time, one being a baby donkey - that would be something to see.

Pilate's parade would be filled with the faithful waving flags and banners. Jesus' parade would have nothing of the sort, and so, instead, the faithful would have "cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road". Now we aren't told what kind of branches they were from Matthew's gospel, but given the climate, it could easily be assumed that they were palms, as palms were readily available and free of charge.

You may be wondering, why does she call this day Cedar Sunday? I'm so glad you asked, and I'm happy to tell you why. Jesus' parade was about rubbing excess in Pilate's face as well as announcing his arrival in a very public way. Jesus was a wanted man from the first day of his birth. By the time he was coming into Jerusalem to announce himself, the governor and Emperor had changed, yet the fear surrounding Jesus and his powers was, if anything, stronger than on the day of his birth.

Jesus' followers used what they had, which was palm fronds and branches. We live in a very different climate than Jerusalem. Palms do not grow here. What we do have in abundance is cedar. And so, in keeping with the intention of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and as we are followers of Jesus, we use cedar or whatever plant is freely and readily available. Our first year on Zoom, some of you had fresh spring flowers such as daffodils and tulips that were waved in our virtual procession.

It's not that I'm opposed to palms. What I am opposed to is the horrendous amounts of money it costs to harvest, bundle, import and ship them. For something that is a common plant, readily available, it costs hundreds of dollars to import and that makes absolutely no fiscal sense at all.

The first recording of Palm Sunday festivities dates back to the 4th century, yet it wasn't officially adopted into the Western Christian calendar until the 8th Century. And yet, we are so precious about the object, the palms, that we lose sight of the meaning of the object, an ordinary item, easily accessible which was used as a counterpoint to riches and lavish wastefulness.

The chant that we say at the beginning of the service, "Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest", do you know what it means? Hosanna literally means "save us". There are many ways to take that word, Hosanna. Save us from what? From temptation? From overindulgence? From sin? Most likely it was a cry of desperation, save us from Pilate and the Roman tyranny that has held us captive and afraid all our lives. Roman occupation was no laughing matter. The Romans ruled by force and fear. If you did not fall in line, you were punished in a spectacularly public fashion – by crucifixion. More on that on Good Friday.

This is the first day of Holy Week and I encourage you to join me this week. We will gather every day at 10:00 am Mountain Time. On Tuesday you would have received an email from me with the Worship link for Wednesday as well as a list of services from today until the end of Easter. There is also a list of readings for each of the Sunday's as well as a pastoral letter.

In case you don't recall receiving it, or didn't look closely at Tuesday's email, I will attach them to today's Worship Notes. Please take time to read these documents.

Tomorrow's service will be the Stations of the Cross from Wild Goose Publications, which is from the Iona, just off the coast of Scotland. There are fourteen stations and fifteen readings with a hymn, and a prayer. The stations are pencil drawings, quite ordinary yet incredibly powerful to see. The Stations of the Cross will be hung before the service begins tomorrow and will remain up through the season of Easter. If you are unable to attend tomorrow's service, there will be a set of laminated notes for a self-guided tour of the fourteen stations.

Tuesday's service is from the United Church of Canada and was written this year. It is a service of Tenebrae which takes six candles, plus the Christ Candle and references the Gospel readings from Lent 1 to Cedar Sunday. It is a service of lamentation with readings, prayers, hymns and dialogue for each of the six candles.

Wednesday's service is from the Church of England and combines the story of Mary Magdalene with the story of Jesus. Mary who is often referred to as the Apostle to the Apostles was the first person to see Jesus on the Day of Resurrection. She was the only apostle to stay close when Jesus was crucified. And the only apostle to hastily prepare him as the sun was setting, for his burial.

Thursday we will return to Iona for Maundy Thursday and will have an opportunity for hand-washing and blessings as well as a sermon on the Three Sacred Days or Triduum of Christ.

Friday we will reflect on the cross, and all of the adornments, as well as what they stand for. It is a service which has been modified from the Book of Alternative Services and will contain a hymn refrain as well as the extremely long gospel reading as Jesus is led along the Via Dolorosa after his arrest. There will also be a discussion on just what is "good" about Good Friday. We will have the opportunity to pick up a black stone at the beginning of the service and, when the time is right, lay it down at the cross while picking up a white river rock to carry with you and remind you of who you are and whose you are.

Saturday is a contemplative service of Lament where we will hear the Lamentations of Jeremiah and discuss those things we miss – in the Church, in the world, in the community and in our lives as we continue to walk towards a COVID endemic time.

And finally there is the day of Resurrection – Easter Day! One week from today we will gather again to celebrate the empty tomb, the new life and the promise of resurrection to eternal life. AND as in previous years, you are invited to wear your Sunday best and your best Easter bonnet. I'm using the term "bonnet" loosely.

Any kind of fabulous hat or fascinator, or something creative to stick atop your head. Bonus points if you decorate it from stuff you already have at home.

And I need a favour. There are a LOT of moving pieces for these services. Many speaking parts, and I am in need of many readers. If you are planning to attend any of the services this week and would be willing to read, whether you have read before or not, please let me know. Monday, Tuesday and Friday especially it would be great to have several voices. Whether you will be attending in person or online, I can always put you to work.

And so my friends, as we kick off Holy Week I invite you to take a journey with me to a land far away, to meet an assortment of characters drawn in today's language with images that may startle, surprise, delight and even dismay. Together we will follow in the footsteps of our brother Jesus, who is the resurrection and the light.

Today he made his presence known to those in authority. As we move through the rest of this week, we will see that walk celebrated and lauded in different ways...each of them leading to the cross, to the tomb and ultimately to the empty tomb and the resurrection.

Won't you join me on this journey?

Let the Church say, "Amen"!

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Cedar Sunday – 02 April 2023
Matthew 21.1-11