

Here We Go...Again

It was a liturgical year ago, and chronologically 54 weeks ago that we first entered lockdown. So much has happened in that time. Since then we have learned how to offer Worship online. After a few initial bumps, we are in a much better place...as far as online worship goes. We have grown from a small yet mighty local parish to a global worshipping community.

To be honest, when we first went into lockdown, I was expecting we'd be "back to normal" in a couple of weeks. Then I thought it would be a month. Then I thought it would be summer. Time continued to tick by and we were still locked down. Mask wearing, physical distancing, and hand sanitizing became part of daily life.

Globally, the world seemed to exhale. Wildlife appeared in urban centres. Clear, pollution-free skies appeared over Asia. Highways, usually clogged with vehicles, were close to empty. Airports were empty, as were public transportation stations and subways.

We weren't sure what was happening and so we waited, and waited, and waited. Hope was always present, as was fear and anxiety. And today, we continue to wait. Vaccines have been developed and are being distributed. Some areas have re-opened and others are back in lockdown.

Life has changed. The Church has changed. And yet faith has not changed. Hope has not changed. Love has not changed. Who we are as a Community of faith has changed. Whose we are as Children of God has not changed.

And even as we enter our second pandemic Holy Week, many things are the same and yet many more have changed. I think it would be true to say that we have changed. Who we are as individuals, and who we are as a community is different. I have changed a great deal. In some ways I am more afraid, and in others I have more gumption.

All of this to say, we have heard the "triumphal entry" story before. This year we hear it from Mark's perspective. Jesus knows that Herod is looking for him. The son of the man who ordered the killing of all male children under the age of two. Jesus has been preparing his disciples for the time when he will give his life, and they have not yet understood what his cryptic messages mean. Including the message of this day, what has been known as Palm Sunday.

In Mark's gospel it is described as "leafy branches that they had cut in the fields." (Mark 11.8, NRSV) It is in John's Gospel that palms are named.

For most of my adult life Palm Sunday was about palm crosses, waved as we shouted Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest! It was about donkeys in Church. Seriously, her name was Molly. She came to St. James Anglican in Hespeler for four years that I remember. She taught me a few things.

1. Wet donkey smells worse than wet dog.
2. She will not be moved further than she wishes to be moved, no matter how hard you push against her.
3. If fed enough apples, she'll empty both her bowel and her bladder at a most inopportune time. (see #2)
4. Every donkey has darker fur in the shape of a cross from their mane to their tale and from shoulder to shoulder. Beast of burden or blessed animal? Likely both are true.

I want to share a poem with you from Mary Oliver. It is called "The Poet Thinks about the Donkey"

On the outskirts of Jerusalem the donkey waited.

Not especially brave, or filled with understanding, he stood and waited.

How horses, turned out into the meadow, leap with delight!

How doves, released from their cages, clatter away, splashed with sunlight.

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.

Then he let himself be led away.

Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!

And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.

Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.

I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.

When I re-read the Palm Sunday gospels I realise that the palms were not about something ceremonial. They were about a symbolic gesture. Palms in antiquity were symbols of peace, but that was not the meaning of them on that particular day.

You see, the “triumphal entry” was not a benign parade. For all intents and purposes, Jesus “triumphal entry” was a protest march. Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas would have arrived at the Western gates with horses, chariots, chariot drivers, all draped in royal purple. The crowds would have been waving flags of welcome and celebration. It would have been a military showing of strength and dominance.

So here comes the itinerant preacher from Nazareth who is surrounded with a dozen men of various backgrounds...none of whom were soldiers. Jesus’ followers were ordinary people who were tired of being afraid. They didn’t have the resources for horses, chariots and flags. So they used a baby donkey tied up in the city walls. They threw their cloaks on the ground and grabbed the closest thing they could to wave - branches from the fields or ditch weeds.

Since then, Palm Sunday has not always been “palm” Sunday. In some areas, palms were not readily available and as such that day was known as Yew Sunday or Branch Sunday. The Western Church tends towards preciousness when we look at some symbols. Because Jesus may have used palms on that significant Sunday, so must we; even though palms are not readily available.

From a practical perspective, it is expensive to import palms, especially live palms. Jesus parade was not about pomp and ceremony, it MOCKED pomp and ceremony. His followers were making do with what they had at the ready. And so should we, which is why I’ve asked you to find cedar or another available green branch or symbol of Spring.

Herod was all about power. He was more interested in the power and might of his army, then he was interested in the people. He was the self-proclaimed king of the Jews, which to him meant power.

Jesus was all about the people. He was more interested in loving and helping those who needed, then following societal rules that created a division into “haves and have-nots”. Jesus was the rightful King of the Jews, which to him meant love.

From the West gate, we have the military parade of might, force and fear. From the East gate, we have the political parade of hope, defiance, and desperation.

What do you think Hosanna means? For many years I thought it was a rallying cry meaning “Yay Jesus! WooHoo!” (I’m paraphrasing).

I've learned that Hosanna actually means "I beg you to save" or "please deliver us". When Jesus' followers were calling out "Hosanna" they were crying out in fear "save us from the tyrant Herod". "Keep us safe from the forces of might and evil that seek to keep us downtrodden". And Jesus answered that cry; he answered that plea, with his life.

Last week we heard the story of King David and his dual blessed and cursed life. His son Solomon was David's first descendant to ride the king's mule, and be celebrated as the next King of a kingdom that would have no end (1 Kings, Chapter 1). Jesus would be David's last descendant to be King of the Jews forever.

The prophecy from Zechariah 9:9-10, riding into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey was an unmistakable fulfillment of God's word, declaring to all he is the rightful successor to the King, from this moment on, and that his kingdom would be eternal.

Cedar or Palm Sunday is a declaration of victory over sin. It marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry as this week would be his last week before dying on Good Friday. All of the events of Holy Week would be understood more clearly after Christ's resurrection, Sunday morning. Palm Sunday was the procession of a king of another kind.

As Holy Week unfolds over the next seven days, I invite you to join me for some if not all of the services that will be each day at 10:00 am. As the week unfolds, the story is told in more fullness as we prepare ourselves for the Triduum or Three Sacred Days (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday). Yet instead of foot washing, there will be hand washing. Instead of physically presenting the symbols of crucifixion in person, it will be on a screen. Instead of a service of ten readings, chants and the renewal of baptismal vows we will have a service of Lament where we remember what we have lost; we remember how things used to be; we long and hope for how things will once again be.

The services will be similar to many we observed last year with some tweaks and new offerings for this year. This week will be emotional; Holy Week is always a mental, spiritual and physical journey. There will not be Worship Notes until Sunday, as the services are intended to be experiential.

In short, I invite you to join me on a journey...a journey of fear. A journey of faith. A journey of hope. A journey through the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry, to a deep dive into ourselves, a time of washing our hands, a time of meditating on the cross, a time of lament, and finally a time of hope and celebration - muted though that may be.

So many things are the same as they were last year: we are in a type of lockdown. We are unable to travel to see our families. We are worshipping online.

And yet, so many things are different as last year: we have learned how to have communion from our homes, and on Easter Sunday we will have the option of receiving Communion from our vehicles, a vaccine has been developed and is being distributed widely. We have become an unexpected International Worshipping Community - separated geographically, yet connected through faith.

For the blessings we have, those expected and unexpected; those large and small, we give thanks. Amen.

The Reverend Andrea Brennan
Sermon for Cedar Sunday

28 March 2021
Mark 11.1-11