

Why Cedar? Triumphant Entry? If you say so –

It's been three years, liturgically speaking. In calendar years it's been about 30 days more than three years. It was March 2020, just in time for Holy Week, we were told to shutter our beloved buildings and figure out another way to worship together. Most of us thought this COVID thing would settle down in a few weeks, a couple of months at the most.

When I look back to how we tackled technology three liturgical years ago it makes me shudder. We were doing the best we could, and then we learned another way, which, with time and patience, became easier.

Last year, Holy Week 2021, we hoped to be open and yet watching new variants and case counts rise, the decision was made to stay online only. It was challenging and we muddled through. We offered Communion To Go and after Worship I stood in the rain and cold, for a half dozen of the faithful to come for Easter Communion.

Preparing for Holy Week 2022 I feared that we were going to be closed again. At a meeting in late January, your leadership made a decision that we would re-open in time for Ash Wednesday. It took a bit of doing and a lot of work, but we got there.

In Person-only worship has challenges. Online-only worship has challenges. Blended worship, with In Person AND Online has double the challenges. No, our Worship services are far from perfect, yet we are working together to continually tweak, switch out and learn new ways of improving our Worship experience.

There are many things about contemporary worship that irritate me. I dislike that liturgical companies, because they have a captured market, charge exorbitant amounts of money for things like palm fronds and palm crosses.

A few years ago I started researching the idea that this particular Sunday, the Sunday which began Holy Week, became Palm Sunday. The gospels don't always agree *gasp*.

As the post-modern church, we tend to get "precious" about things that were not precious at all in Jesus' day. What I mean is, Jesus followers used palms upon his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. Not because they were a special symbol that was meant to be elevated and sanctified for all time, but rather because they were poor and it was easily available.

Palms, mostly date palms, are fairly prevalent in the Middle East. They grow wild and can be plucked from the side of the road. They were, for all intents and purposes, weeds. And yet somehow, over the past two thousand years it has been decided that we MUST have palms for our celebration or it simply isn't "kosher", if you will.

The earliest Palm Sunday services were held in the late 4th century with them gaining more of a following in the latter 8th century. When they moved into North America is a matter of some debate, which is best left for another time.

Jesus' followers used what was at hand. In researching the rubrics of palm Sunday it was often mentioned that palms or other branches from local trees were to be used for this festival of celebration.

Upon learning that I thought it was time to take a stand. The purpose of palm Sunday is not the palms, but the symbolism of the moment. The entry into Jerusalem was anything but triumphal. If anything it was a humble anti-establishment rally.

Jesus' followers knew he was going to confront Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect aka Governor for Emperor Tiberius. Pilate arrived at the west gates of Jerusalem with chariots, chariot drivers, crowds shouting in solidarity (and from fear) with Rome. There was pomp and pageantry and a lot of money spent for the display of ferocious might and majesty.

Jesus told two of his followers to find him a donkey (or two, depending on which Gospel you read) in the village ahead of them with instructions on what to do and say if anyone questioned what they were doing. They returned with a donkey,

"and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen". (Luke 19.35-37, NRSV)

No mention of a single branch, palm or otherwise in Luke's gospel.

The cloaks spread on the donkey before sitting Jesus on it were in mockery of Pilate and his royal purple as far as the eye could see.

Pilate, his chariot and chariot drivers would have cut a fine figure with their trumpets blaring, the entire community called to herald his arrival.

Jesus' disciples, knowing Pilate was about might, fear and power, mocked what he was doing with their own much more humble gathering of the faithful. Instead of chariots, they walked. Instead of noble steeds, they had a single donkey. Instead of jewel encrusted saddles, they had meager cloaks.

The route before Pilate would have been lined with banners, the crowd waving flags and the ground would have "rolled out the red carpet" as it were. Lots of show, lots of colour, lots of expense. How does Jesus respond to this?

Mockery.

In our liturgy for today we are told the crowds greeted Jesus with shouts of Hosanna. One would be forgiven thinking that Hosanna was a shout of great triumph and welcome. In fact, Hosanna is derived from the Hebrew phrase "hosia-na" meaning "save us", "save we pray", or "save now".

They were not welcoming Jesus, they were pleading to be freed of Roman occupation and rule. Remember, the Romans had captured Jerusalem in 63 BCE and ruled for another three hundred years, through several attempted coups from the people of Jerusalem.

The Romans were NOT nice people. Crucifixion was a bloodsport and used for both entertainment (I knew, gross) and for brute force rule.

Step out of hand and the next person nailed to a tree could be you. That's a story which will be fleshed out more fully this coming week.

Another thing that has bugged me for a long time - I know, it's a grumpy kind of sermon today. This Sunday was originally known as Palm Sunday. Then, about 1970 it was changed to "Palm Sunday of the Passion of our Lord". The idea behind it was to squish all of holy week into one service. The service would begin with palms and the "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, then the liturgy would switch to the agony of Good Friday.

Um, excuse me? To this I call liturgical – whiplash.

In my humble opinion, you cannot race from Palm Sunday into the Passion of Jesus or Good Friday in sixty minutes. It over simplifies the most sacred moments of the Christian calendar. It waters down the worst days of Jesus' life and ministry.

We deserve better than that. Jesus deserves better than that.

And so, for those of you who are wondering why I preside at eight services in eight days, nine services in eight days if you include Rocky Mountain Village the reason is simple – in a single word – emotion.

It's to provide the full range of emotions as we walk through the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. In previous years we would start the week with the Stations of the Cross. Karen Brodie joined us last Wednesday with a breathtakingly beautiful and heartbreaking Stations of the Cross.

And so Monday we will gather together for a service about Mary of Bethany and the process she undertook when she decided to anoint Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.

Tuesday we will gather again for a service about Jesus as a nurturing, maternal figure, as we explore how heartbreaking love can be.

Wednesday we will gather for our "traditional" mid-week Wednesday service with a special twist which features Mary of Magdala.

The services Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are to invite us into a closer relationship with the divine as we gird ourselves for the horrors of the Paschal Triduum aka Three Sacred Days. Taizé style a capella music has been added to the Holy Week services for the first time since COVID shut us down.

Thursday we will relocate from Christ Church Anglican to Fernie Knox United for a special service of blessing and Communion as we begin the Triduum.

Friday we will gather again for the agony of the cross, with the arduous gospel reading, reflections on what this all means, followed by meditations on the cross.

Saturday we will gather for the final of the Triduum services as we learn about lament and we engage in lamenting all we have lost, and search for the glimmer of hope in what is yet to come.

And then next Sunday we get to put on our best, fanciest or silliest Easter bonnets and hats to celebrate the Day of the Resurrection with a chanting of the Easter Psalm, traditional Easter Gospel reading, a Sermon, some music and lots and lots of Alleluias!

I hope you will consider joining me for some or even all of the services. There will not be any Worship Notes for services, aside from Sunday's. Sermons will not be recorded or shared following worship.

Holy Week is meant to be an immersive experience, in which you are invited to give yourself over to the experience. There will be laughter, likely some anger and maybe even a few tears.

This is the most sacred week of the year. Please join me for something profoundly meaningful, whether in person or online. And if you can't attend all of the services, come to as many as you wish. If you have questions, please ask me. Invite your friends to join you for one, a few or all of our Holy Week Services.

Putting these services together has been an absolute labour of love. Some of the services needed minor revising for blended worship and some demanded absolute re-writes. I've tapped into ecumenical resources from Iona and mined the resources of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada.

At the end of the week, I hope you'll join me for something that promises to be life-changing. All of this to say, our Holy Week journey begins today. It began at 10:00 am this morning, and it will continue until Saturday at approximately 11:00 am, when we will wait, with anticipation, for the Day of the Resurrection.

Between now and then, there's a really cool story I want to share with you; with some characters you've met before; with some you may know a lot, and some a little. Come and join me. It will be transformative.

Giving thanks to God from whom all blessings flow.
Let the Church say - AMEN

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United Church
Fernie, B.C.
Sermon for Cedar Sunday - 10 April 2022
Luke 19.28-44