

Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

By Rev. Adam Blons

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11

Here now these words from the Gospel of Matthew:

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.<sup>[a]</sup>” <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> “Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd<sup>[b]</sup> spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

<sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

May these words be to us our light and our life

**Thanks be to God!**

## Sermon

I was really looking forward to that palm procession slideshow at the beginning of the service. Thank you, Jim Johnson, for the parade of familiar faces through our living rooms!

It was so good to “see” at least some of you!

A few of you have heard me say this, but one of the things about leading worship this way is that you get to see us each week, but we don’t see you.

And I miss you. There is something so reassuring about seeing you all show up at church week after week. Maybe it’s the job security. Or maybe it is the shared anticipation that something wonderful and surprising always happens whenever 2 or 3 of us are gathered.

Whatever it is, thank you for continuing to show up, especially in these difficult times!

Palm Sunday is one of those days you don’t want to miss. And yet, today I am the sea of palm branches waving in the sanctuary and hearing the chorus of our Hosannas. I expect you are missing them, too. This is just one of those spectacle Sundays when Jesus becomes larger than life for us. In my previous congregation, we created a 12 foot tall Jesus puppet who led us into worship on Palm Sunday. He took three people to operate as he made his way down the center aisle his arms outstretched during our palm procession. Talk about larger than life! Something about this day draws us in to the story as we join the procession and walk with Jesus into Holy Week.

And yet, if we had been living in Jerusalem at the time, I wonder how many of us would have even noticed the first Palm parade. Without social media, or anything more than a town crier, most of the people living in Jerusalem probably had never heard of Jesus. The “parade” of palms we imagine was more likely just a spontaneous gathering of

those misfits, widows and outcasts who had heard about Jesus and longed for his arrival. That is why they shout, Hosanna!”

For a long time, I assumed that Hosanna was just another churchy praise words like Alleluia. But hosanna means “save us.”

Those who gathered along the road were yelling, “Save us!”

Hosanna

But save them from what?

Reading this story in today’s context, one word stood out in a way it never had to me before. It says in verse 10 that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil.

Indeed, Jerusalem was a mess. Living under an oppressive Roman empire, Jerusalem was the stronghold of Jewish culture and identity but it had also become a hotbed of corruption and violence. Jews experienced intimidation, discrimination, and exploitation. Their efforts to push back were put down. Their future as a people was uncertain. There was fear and anger and grief and nowhere to go. And so they shouted, “Hosanna! Save us,” out of utter desperation.

We know something about living in turmoil. Even though we may be safe at home, the threat of this virus and its aftermath looms over everyone and everything right now. The future is so uncertain. There are days the turmoil just grabs hold of me, stirring up grief over mounting losses and fear about what is still ahead and concern for those on the front lines.

And so it matters to me, that Jesus enters Jerusalem, faces its turmoil, and continues to follow the way of powerful self-emptying love all the way through this Holy Week. And so I believe he is with us in this calamity, showing up anywhere we see truly self-less acts of love.

Now some are trying to offer a twisted a notion of selfless love these days. I heard two quotes this week from national leaders who said they would rather die from COVID 19 than have the their children and grandchildren suffer the consequences of an economic collapse caused by the current shut down. Sacrificing for future generations sounds noble, but of course rejecting social distancing and going about our daily business not only puts us at risk for contracting the virus, but everyone around us as well. Far from selfless, ignoring social distancing and public health recommendations is one of the most selfish things we can do right now. For examples of selfless love, we must look elsewhere.

This week, Corinne and I were with over 200 religious leaders, barbershop owners and childcare operators on a call with Governor Walz and Lt. Governor Flannagan organized by Isaiah. Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer, pastor at First Unitarian Universalist Church in Rochester lead an opening reflection that invited us to see how love, this truly selfless love, shows up right in the middle of hardship and struggle.

“Right now,” he said, “love looks like empty stadiums and sanctuaries and shopping malls  
as we realize that people are more important than profit –  
love looks like windows covered in hearts, and bears,  
bringing a new necessary beauty to our neighborhoods –  
love looks like cheers across empty streets  
for healthcare workers as they change shifts –  
love looks like naming, as essential,  
many workers who are often forgotten and underpaid –  
grocery clerks, preschool teachers, nurses,  
and, as Dr. King called us to realize in 1968 –  
that in the final measure, physicians and sanitation workers are equally important.

Love looks like people realizing how fragile, and how beautiful life and community and handshakes and hugs are – and we remember a core part of our identity – that it takes all of us doing our part, for us to survive and thrive together.”

The Governor and Lt. Governor had a similar message and confessed that it was simple but not easy. Stay positive and reach out to help your neighbor.

Love will be just as important as respirators, masks and a vaccine in saving us from COVID-19! Hosannah!

But this path of self-emptying love that Jesus models and calls us to, doesn't just save us from something, it saves us for something, too. What are we being saved for?

When the immediate threat of COVID 19 passes, what will we have learned? Will we just go back to the way things were before? Or will there be new ways of being and working and living, new found purpose and resolve? This crisis has awakened us to a deeper sense of our shared humanity. It has also brought to light the troubling inequalities in our society. For example, with the recent release of state and federal assistance to address the unprecedented unemployment, undocumented and mixed-status immigrant families are shut out of state unemployment insurance and are not eligible to benefit from a federal stimulus check. This means almost 200,000 Minnesotans, and millions of people across this country, will fall further through the cracks in this uncertain and painful time. Will we become so tired of social distancing in this time that we will stop the other forms of distancing—discrimination and inequity--that are still deeply woven into our world? I think we will if we join this rag tag palm procession, walk with Jesus, put one foot in front of the other and lead with love. (Song) Amen.