



Palm Sunday (B)

It's Holy Week. So What?

RCL: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47 or Mark 15:1-39, [40-47]

With so much going on in the world, it may seem almost silly to insist on giving so much time and energy to the religious observance of Holy Week. This is especially true when one considers that so many people around us may only pay attention on Easter at best, and even that, for some, is at least partially out of obligation.

Add the difficulties of the pandemic on top of that, and the fact that most churches still cannot meet in person, and Holy Week itself may begin to feel a bit out of touch with the world around us.

We alone do not have precise answers for the human suffering that we see around us, for violence or death or disease – or where to find hope. What we do know, however, is that the narratives that form us — the stories of our families, our country, our faith — are the eyeglasses through which we see the stories on the news and the things around us. It's through those stories that we come to conclusions about ourselves and our world and what is hopeless and what is redeemable. It's through those stories that we see ourselves and our places in the world.

If your family story is that the people in your bloodline are giving and caring people, then you, too, will be encouraged to be generous and attentive. If we believe that America's story is one of ingenuity and bravery, then a true patriot will do their best to have courage and see creative solutions to even the most daunting problems.

Religious stories are even bigger than that. They tell us not only how we should live, but how we got here and where we're going. During Holy Week and Easter, here in the northern hemisphere, we tell the story of the Resurrection just as we watch creation come back to life in the springtime.

This week, we religiously observant Christians have the opportunity to live through the story we proclaim, day by day: the story of the last days of Jesus Christ, his last meal with his friends, his death by execution, and an unexpected and joyous ending. We do so with our ancestors in faith, and we do so with those yet to be born, who will follow us in Holy Weeks to come.

Right when things seem at a tipping point in our nation and our world, this story is calling to us again, if we dare to see the world through it. We are invited to forget that we know how this Holy Week story ends and place ourselves *into* the story itself: to feel the palm branches, to taste wine and bread, to feel cool water on our feet as they are washed, and to come and mourn at the foot of a wooden cross. Though most of us cannot experience many, if any, of these things in person this year, we remember how they felt, and we dare never take them for granted again.

In a world surrounded by disease, death, and suffering, we are being called to stare both love and suffering — *God's own* love and suffering — in the face.

Our Holy Week story begins today, whether we grip actual palm branches this year or not. The palms we typically wave on Palm Sunday are burned the following year, as the story begins again.

We are called today into the story of Jesus — and called to pay attention to it anew. We have come to the holy city, Jerusalem, where Christ is entering, riding on a colt, or a donkey, or both, depending on which Gospel you read.

As Jesus rides along, a crowd begins to gather. Of course, this is before social media could gather people from all over the place in minutes, way back when members of a crowd had to hear and see and decide to gather on the spot. And the odd thing about the way the Gospels tell this story is that the city and the crowds become speaking characters.

As Matthew puts it: *“When [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’”*

Anyone who has ever loved a city — or any place, really — knows that places have personalities. Each place decides what it values, and it shapes everything from its streets to its rituals. Jerusalem here can be safely classified as “skeptical.” It is a place where major religions are born, and messiahs are common.

And yet, a crowd still comes to gather around Jesus, the prophet and teacher who has been drawing huge crowds, the one who is rumored to have healed the sick and driven out demons and restored sight to the blind and even raised the dead.

The crowds gathered around God in the flesh, celebrating his arrival, shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” He was, they believed, the one to save them from oppression.

Jesus knows how this story will end. He knows it will be painful. But Jesus still shows up.

And Jesus will show up on Sunday whether or not *any of us* shows up, in whatever ways we safely can, to form our community around the story. Jesus will show up whether or not we choose to see our world through this story.

You may not be able to attend to this story as much as you would like. None of us can, really, for the second year in a row, because of the pandemic. You may also have work or family or school obligations or you may just be exhausted from all you have to do. That's okay.

The Resurrection will happen anyway. It is an eternal truth. It happened once, and Christians around the world sing it and tell it again, every year, with or without our personal involvement.

We are each invited, however, to be part of it. To let this story form us. To see the world through it and maybe, just maybe, begin to answer some hard questions about justice and peace and disease and suffering and death and resurrection and hope. So even if you can't attend to it the way you're used to or the way you might like — take some time to observe and ponder: Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper. Good Friday and the Crucifixion. Holy Saturday and the Great Vigil of Easter, as the Church retells the whole salvation story again.

We are in this story, now.

From now on, you are the crowds, even if we are physically apart. You are the disciples. You are the witnesses.

Forget that you know how this story ends. Learn again to see your world through new eyes, through the disciples' eyes, so that maybe we can find hope for justice and healing in the midst of the chaos and pain in the world around us. Because the disciples, in their world, also knew chaos and pain and fear and death.

Put on the eyeglasses of the story of Jesus, just for this week, again.

And as the Resurrection comes again to us next week, may we leave with hope renewed that surprise endings are possible, that hope is not lost, and that even Death is not greater than God, nor greater than love. That if Christ can rise from the dead, then surely, *surely*, there is hope for us. Let us tell the Story again. Amen.

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