

April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday

John 12

Holy Week: Audience or Participant?

Good morning. I imagine some of you are tuning in to hear that wise, eloquent, white-haired gentleman that was on last week. I'm slightly, less white-haired, slightly less wise and slightly less eloquent. So bear with me.

This is weird (and I should warn you, I may well say that about every service this Holy Week). But this is weird. This a Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is supposed to be about fanfare. Processing in with Palm branches, shouting Alleluia. Kicking Holy Week off right. Or is it? Every year on Palm Sunday it occurs to me that there is a temptation to see ourselves as an audience on Holy Week rather than a participant. That is especially true this year as we can't get together and process together and wave palm branches together. Instead we are watching on a screen.

So, let's stop and take a breath before we enter into Holy Week. What did Pastor B tell us last week? Breathe in God's peace. Breathe out God's grace.

We need that breath.

So let's establish ourselves right now, not as an audience watching on a screen, but as participants in Palm Sunday and Holy Week. This is about us. We are in the story. We are the reason there needs to be a story.

Palm Sunday with all its details, all its parts, all its emotions is our story. We hear a version of it every year; we start the Sunday with fanfare and palms, singing, "Hosanna!" and then the whirlwind of the mess of humanity comes, and all of a sudden Jesus is dead. Each year, we come to this same story, and each year we bring to it the hurts and joys we've just lived through. The births and deaths, the sufferings and excitements, the pain and the learnings that time has taught us since our last Palm Sunday.

It's easy to rush through this, skip through the week with our eyes fixed on what we celebrate next Sunday. To sit dutifully through today, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday services, knowing that the real deal is on Easter morning. Because we know what's coming next. We know that today and Thursday and Friday are merely the setup to the triumphant Resurrection on Easter. We know that Jesus will defeat evil, injustice, and other forms of

death, not with the military might of kings but with the new life of the Resurrection. But this will come later. For now, there is value in sitting in the Passion without rushing to the Resurrection.

Too often in life, we don't have a happy ending to hold during tough times. What if I could tell you today, "One more week and Corona Virus would be no more?" That would be incredibly cool. And I'm not sure how many people kept their Lenten sacrifices this year with everything else we have been forced to give up, but in a normal year, this is point where we could say, "But in just a week, everything will be great! I'll get to eat chocolate or watch tv or go on Facebook or – your Lenten discipline of choice – again!" The blessing of the church calendar is that we get to live through the seasons, year after year, delving deeper and bringing more experience from our lives into the meaning of the stories.

But there is a danger to this thinking—that we might skip through the tragedy to get to the happy ending. Skip the complicated pregnancy to get to Christmas morning. Skip the flight into Egypt to get to Jesus in the Temple. Skip the illness to get to the healing. Skip the hungry to get to the loaves and fishes. Skip the martyrdom to get to the sainthood. Skip the Crucifixion to get to the Resurrection.

One of the benefits of all of our Holy Week service offerings is that we pull out big moments in this story, draw near to them, learn about them, live them, identify with them, sit with them. On Thursday, we will sit in the moments of Gethsemane. We will sit in the times, like the disciples, that we simply can't stay attuned and attentive to God at work in our midst. We will sit through the betrayal of Christ that we see – and participate in – in the world around us.

On Friday, we will sit in the moment of death. How has our experience of death changed since we last heard the story? What grief do we bring to the political execution of our savior, the political martyrdom of our messiah, the murder at the hands of the authorities, claiming law and order?

The next time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we'll hear the familiar words: "Take, eat; this is my body," and "Drink from it, all of you." And what will be different? This year, this time, a lot will be different. Self-quarantines and shelter in place orders have kept us away from this table for a while. The world has changed while we've been away. We have

changed. But God hasn't. So let's just sit here in the midst of the change, in the midst of the struggle, pre-victory, pre-Easter, and see our place in the story.

Look at all the elements in the story. The plot, the places, the people—we might know them well. So, take another look at the props. We see a donkey and a colt, regular livestock given for the glory of God. We see palms, stripped from the plants grown naturally all around them, and waved to the glory of God. We see cloaks, spread out on the dusty road, taken off of normal people's backs and offered to the glory of God. Later, there is bread and wine. A table. A simple meal made sacred in the glory of God. These are everyday, mundane, secular, and worldly items, made holy in their offering to the Messiah. In their offering, they have been made sacramental.

Jesus, too, lives in the perfection of the worldly made godly. Fully human and fully God. Paul reminds the Philippians that while Jesus "was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." Even in his own identity, Jesus showed us how something so worldly – humanity – can be so holy – divinity.

The Incarnation not only exemplifies all that is sacramental but also blesses that which is human. That Jesus would empty himself in order to be one of us is a sacrifice akin to his crucifixion – have you met humans? We're horrible. What humanity did to Jesus and continues to do to so many who are oppressed, shot, exploited, arrested, deported, and executed, is horrible. Why would God want to be part of this mess? It must be love.

And in return, we are asked to love. To love those who come to the table, even if we know they will betray us. To love the one who asks to borrow our colt, even if it's confusing and requires hospitality and generosity beyond our capabilities. To love the divinity which is in the mess of humanity enough to lay down the coats from our backs. And to love Jesus, the one who has shown us how to seek and honor the divinity in all of the world.

What do we have available to us, as individuals and a community, that we can offer to God and make holy? Look around at what we see, use, take for granted in the day-to-day. How can we make what we have an offering

to God, a thanksgiving of gratitude, an acknowledgment of Christ's good news?

Putting ourselves into the story can be difficult. I have been telling you that when the world is in crisis, that's time for the church to do more, not less. It is time for the church to add, not subtract. We are in that time right now. We can hold onto the hope of Easter as we live into the moments of betrayal, grief, injustice, and violence – in the story of the Passion as well as in our daily lives. May all that we have be made holy. And may everything we have, and everything we do, be done in love. Amen.