

Again and Again: We Draw on Courage

I love Palm Sunday. I love the pageantry. I love the Palms everywhere. I love when the children circle the sanctuary and wave their Palm branches. And so I am missing being inside our church building this day because of all that we are missing about this day. But I have to tell you that what we do on Palm Sunday in our worship service is a modern version of Palm Sunday. It's wonderful hymns, a wonderful anthem sang by our choir, maybe even our bells would have played. But the original Psalm Sunday was a little bit different. It was not so cutesy and it wasn't a hallmark holiday. It was aggressive and it was deeply political.

The Jewish people were under occupation by the Romans and Roman occupation was especially repressive and brutal. The last time that the Jewish people had been free and self-governed also meant that they had their own currency. On their big coin, a palm branch was prominently displayed.

So laying down palm branches ahead of a man riding a colt or donkey was an act of defiance and an aggressive political statement. We want to be free. This guy is going to change things and restore all that we have lost.

Having children wave palm branches is the equivalent of teaching a child to stick up their middle finger in anger...only more political. So I am troubled by the lack of context regarding the palms of Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday was a protest by the people. Palm Sunday is a call for revolution against the powers of oppression, the systems and institutions that occupy foreign lands and repress its citizens with unjust practices and economic policies.

What comes to mind when you think of the word "protestor"? Regardless of what you may initially picture, there are many types of protesters. There are anti-war protests, protesters for common-sense gun legislation and gun rights protesters. There are protesters for liberal causes and conservative causes and everything in between. Sometimes they clash with each other. Protests tend to make us nervous because they carry with them an inherent risk of instability.

Outside the United States, there are even more types of protesters: those who rally in favor of governments and those who seek to overthrow them.

Today, I want you to set your feet in the dust of Jerusalem and look across the sunny stone streets. Hear the cries of a different kind of protest in an occupied land; the people are waving branches and spreading their coats along the road. The crowd is pressing in, clamoring to see the one they've heard about: Jesus of Nazareth. They even dare to proclaim him king.

Hear the talk around you: "I heard he can make lepers clean," says one man to another.

Nearby a woman says, “I heard that his birth was announced by angels.” “That can’t be” comes the reply of another woman. “Who is he, anyway? Moses himself?”

“Well,” comes another voice. I have some relatives in the north. They say that there was this widow whose son had died, and Jesus of Nazareth brought him back from the dead at the funeral. My relatives say they saw it for themselves.”

Everyone’s eyes go wide.

Just then, there’s a commotion in the midst of the crowd. Jesus is coming closer. He’s riding...a colt? The people lay their branches on the road before him as they welcome him into the Holy City. They are truly giving him a royal welcome, reminiscent of the welcome that David got when he brought the ark into Jerusalem. They chant “Hosanna” together.

It seems almost tame to us now, but remember; Israel was not a free country. They were a country that was occupied by a foreign empire and bitter adversary. People didn’t have the right to peaceably assemble, much less assemble to declare a teacher to be a king over and above the mighty empire.

There is not supposed to be any ruler of Israel except Roman’s emperor. And yet, here we are, gathering, chanting, cheering,

It’s unfortunate that we are so familiar with the story, because giving a royal welcome to a religious teacher and shouting, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God!” was a highly subversive act at the time. Roman ruled with an iron fist and they took subversive action seriously. Those who gathered on this first Palm Sunday were risking their lives, and they knew it.

But they still moved forward to see, to shout, to protest the oppression and celebrate the one they thought might free them. And today we stand with them. Today, we declare that we, too, have only one ruler, and that there is no person, economic philosophy or political party that is above God. Only Jesus gets the royal welcome.

Welcome to Holy Week, my friends. It begins with shouting!

Of course we will learn later in the week that this royal welcome will not last. We humans are fragile creatures and we often get it right before messing it all up again. Our momentary courage often precedes our running away.

This is what will happen to Jesus. The crowd that today shouts Hosanna, will on Friday shout, “Crucify him!” They will come to fully understand the danger that Jesus poses to their stability. They will see that he is not a military leader. And they will sacrifice him for continued peace with Rome.

I invite you to look at the picture on the front of your bulletin. It is entitled “Through the Palms” by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman. She says this about her art: Jesus lies down on the donkey’s back, steeling himself before his journey through the palms. He has a target on his back – he’s a disruption to the status quo upheld by the Pharisees and Chief Priests, and a threat to the power of the empire. His friend Lazarus is caught up in it too. I imagine as he closes his eyes and strokes the donkey’s hair, he hears the anguish in Mary and Martha’s voices as they cried out to him, wondering why he took so long. I imagine he smells the pungent fragrance of the burial perfume poured on his feet, bringing into clarity the reality of his impending death. I imagine he sees the judgment on Judas’ face as he was scrutinized for wasting perfume and neglecting those in desperate need. Jesus plans to enter the city in a way that symbolically subverts power, taking a route opposite of the military leaders who oversee the festival celebrations. His entry would make a definitive statement, imaging an alternative kind of power, a servant leader riding a humble donkey. He knew this act would inch him closer to state-sanctioned torture and death.

We are in a time when we need to draw on courage to call into question the structures that uphold systems of oppression. We are in a time when we need to subvert the powerful and protect the vulnerable. The crowds close in on Jesus. Some lift their hands in praise, others point accusingly. I hope this image serves as a reminder to call upon God for the courage you need, to rest and recharge for the work ahead. But I hope it also heartens you to move forward in courage, even in the midst of great resistance, toward the work God is calling you into.

Today begins Holy Week. Today, we again set our feet on the road to the Last Supper, to the garden to pray, to the cross and to the tomb. And while you may already know the ending, pretend for a moment that you don’t. The disciples didn’t. When Jesus died on Friday, that was supposed to be the end. If death is not real, then Easter is no miracle.

So, plant your feet in the dust of Jerusalem this day. Feel the palm branch in your hand and remember the teacher who rode through the subversive plot on a colt. This Holy Week story is life. This story is our lives. Joy. Love. Fear. Grief. Betrayal. Pain. Even the ordinary: eating, drinking, washing. This place, is where we learn both joy and grief, celebration and pain: in church. During Holy Week. Here, we see our ordinary lives echoed in the life and love of Jesus.

Listen to this poem by Rev. Sarah Are entitled Peaceful Protest

I wonder if Jesus could feel his heartbeat
In his throat, the way I do when I’ afraid.
I wonder if he had to take deep breaths,

In through his nose, out through his mouth.
Tricking his body into a state of calm.
I wonder if he was nauseous, like I am
When I'm headed into a hard conversation.
I wonder if he had to summon his courage,
Tucking fear away so that he could hold onto
What mattered most with both hands.

I wonder, because time has taught us
That it is not uncommon
For a peaceful protest
To start or end
With an unjust death.

So I wonder.
Did he know?
Was he afraid?
Did anyone see it?

I want to hold what matters most with both hands.

The story of Holy Week, this story, Jesus' story, is our story. It is the story of how love and grace became flesh and defeated death and changed everything. It is the story of every time you have experienced grace when you thought your world had ended. It is the story of how very loved we are.

What will it take for us next year, to drop the palm branches and raise our middle fingers? What would we have to believe about oppression and empire to reclaim the original intent of the palms on Palm Sunday?

Let's start by having conversations about foreign occupation, injustice, politics of the empire, economic policies and so much more!

So, let the church rise up, imagining itself on the streets of first century Jerusalem, today and let the church shout Amen.