

“As Closely As You Can”

John 4:5-42

Part VII of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

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From the Pulpit

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Matthew 21: 1-11

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Prayer for Illumination: Gather us in, O God, and shed your light on these words proclaimed. Silence in us any voice by your own. By the power of your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds for all that you have for us this day. Amen.

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Turmoil. Turmoil. Seems like an appropriate word. Turmoil seems like it is a word that spans the centuries, doesn't it?

In the scripture reading from the Gospel of Matthew we heard moments ago, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is This?’” The words ring out more this year than before.

In Jesus’ day, crushing poverty, brutal Roman oppression, taxation, illnesses for which there was no cure, and perpetual hunger were the norm. They knew nothing else. Suffering was ever-present, expected and perpetual.

On Palm Sunday, people stream into Jerusalem. They come for Passover, the religious holiday, to celebrate the story of the people’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. They should be free now, but Rome occupies their country. Roman soldiers stand on every corner. Passover rekindles their longing for freedom, it rekindles their collective grief, which makes it an uncertain,

precarious time, a time of turmoil.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowd treats Jesus like a king. They wave palms and lay them in his path. Some put their cloaks down in honor. They celebrate him as the one who has come to save them. They shout, “Hosanna!” It means, “Save us. Save us from this turmoil.” The root meaning of turmoil is “tremble.” The coming of the Messiah is earthshaking. Earth shattering.

These days, pandemic shakes us. It shakes our security. It shakes our sense of self.¹

What does it feel like when the earth trembles under your feet?

What does it mean when you are shaken to your core?

What does it feel like to live in these unprecedented times?

The people in the first century knew the hardship. They knew the challenge. They knew the uncertainty.

Jesus lived with the same kind of daily uncertainty that we’re living in.

If you were to name the emotions you’ve had over the last few weeks, or at least since your first cup of coffee this morning, what would they be? Maybe you’ve had more than your fair share of emotions recently...some you didn’t even know you had ...but

¹ Ann Palmerton, www.bspc.org 2020, Sermon entitled “Turmoil.” We are part of a collegial sermon group. Used with permission.

in a time of turmoil....they are front and center.

I've heard from more than a few of you that you are having lots of emotions right now. I've experienced a few of these myself. ²

Maybe what you feel is:

ANXIOUS - I believe something may harm me, but I am not sure what it might be.

FEAR - I believe something may harm me and I am clear what it is.

FRUSTRATED - It should not be this hard.

DENIAL - If I do not pay attention, it will go away.

DISAPPOINTED - This is not what I expected.

Maybe what you feel is:

SADNESS-I have lost something I care about.

LONELINESS-I'm alone and something is missing.

HOPELESSNESS-I can't imagine a future better than the present.

I share these because these emotions are part of our lives right now. They are part of our way of life amidst turmoil. They are only the stories we tell ourselves.

² Dan Newby and Curtis Watkins, *The Field Guide to Emotions: A practical orientation to 150 essential emotions*, 2019.

When the earth shakes under our feet; When our lives are upended and we don't really know what "normal" is any more; We, too, can shout out "Hosanna. Save us. Save us from all of it."

The question for me this week has been, "Who do I want to be during Covid-19?"³ It presents an opportunity to reflect and learn and grow in a really difficult time.

Some of us hold tightly to the fear and anxiety. We act out in the world with that story in our heads. We hoard toilet paper, and buy things we wouldn't normally buy. We complain frequently and shut people out.

Some of us are willing to learn through this challenging time. For instance, we start to give up the things we can't control. We identify our emotions. We recognize that we are all trying to do our best.

Some of us are moving into a new era of growth in our lives. I thank and appreciate others. I look for a way to adapt to changes. I think of others and how to help them.

In a variety of ancient cultures, palm branches represent victory. In the Gospels stories when Jesus enters Jerusalem, crowds go out to meet him, some carrying palm branches, some laying down cloaks. They welcomed him as if he were a conquering, victorious king. In the days that followed the full irony of the act would play itself out. As he was arrested, tried, convicted, and

³ Image on Facebook, citation unknown, with concentric circles of zones: Fear, Learning and Growth.

hung upon a cross. These days it is hard to see any victories in this world.

But today, the palm fronds remind us that God can take the pain and suffering of this world and with the power of love create the most unexpected triumphs.⁴

In the midst of turmoil, life may never be the same. There will be dark days ahead. But as people of faith, we hold fast to the promises of God. God loves us. God cares for us. God will never let us go, this day, always and forever.

This is a time to let Jesus' story touch our story, to let the turmoil of his days inform and reframe our own. Each step we take through Holy Week can enliven our path to a deeper connection with Jesus and can draw our attention to things we may miss otherwise. If we're attentive--and engage our emotions--they'll point us to things we need to pay attention to.

This Holy Week already feels so upside down. Maybe we are in touch with our emotions in a way like we haven't been in a long-time, if ever, and we are being asked to journey with Jesus just as closely as we can. And that feels real and it feels terrifying. Today as Jesus enters Jerusalem he sees danger coming. But he doesn't change course.

This week, under pressure, Jesus will be brave and faithful. This week, under pressure, his disciples will falter. They will fail Jesus, and themselves. One friend will betray another. Ordinary people

⁴ Doug King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, April 4, 2020.

will do mean things. Political powers will mock and execute a wise, compassionate teacher in an exceptionally cruel way.

As followers of Jesus, or as curious witnesses into a faith we don't understand fully, we have other emotions to help us this week, of all weeks.

Because God can take the pain and suffering of this world and with the power of love create the most unexpected triumphs, we too, can tell a different story through these unprecedented times. We move with---

COURAGE - I can do it even though I am afraid.

COMPASSION - I am with you in your challenges.

PERSEVERANCE - I will continue trying until I succeed.

LOVE - I cherish you just as you are.

The last word to hold onto this week is HOPE.

HOPE-I believe the future will be better than the present or the past.

The poem entitled "Rough Translations" from Jan Richardson gathers us into this time in which we live.

Rough Translations

Par' elpida ep' elpidi.

—Romans 4.18, Greek New Testament

(Literally, “Against hope with hope.”)

Hope nonetheless.

Hope despite.

Hope regardless.

Hope still.

Hope where we had ceased to hope.

Hope amid what threatens hope.

Hope with those who feed our hope.

Hope beyond what we had hoped.

Hope that draws us past our limits.

Hope that defies expectations.

Hope that questions what we have known.

Hope that makes a way where there is none.

Hope that takes us past our fear.

Hope that calls us into life.

Hope that holds us beyond death.

Hope that blesses those to come.

—Jan Richardson⁵

It promises to be quite a week. Betrayal, arrest, trial, sentencing, crucifixion, death.... It promises to be quite a week but, God

⁵ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/02/26/day-9-hoping-against-hope/>

willing, it will end with resurrection. This isn't a week for business as usual, it hasn't been business as usual for a while now, so pay attention, stay awake. Walk as close to Jesus as you are able, follow him as closely as you can bear.

Remember God's love can create the most unexpected victories in all times and all places. Death will not have the final word, but waiting there for us on the other side of this turmoil is Hope. It's resurrection hope.

Amen.

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "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." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!” When he 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.”

The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.