

2020 Willow Creek Sermon Palm Sunday

Good Morning Church. I have heard from several of you this week that you are tuning in to our Sunday Morning time. Thanks. Annie, Steve and I are heartened by that news. Feel free to invite others you may know to watch as well. This is a moment in history when we need as much strength and inspiration as we can get.

As you know, this coming week is Holy Week. On Thursday, There will be an on-line Maundy Thursday Service with prompts for you to pause the service in order to do some of the service at home. You will need your Bibles. I suggest that you watch this Maundy Thursday service around your dinner table. If you could have some bread and maybe some wine or juice in a cup, that would be great.

Easter Service will be recorded as well. While I am disappointed that we will not be together for this wondrous moment, God knows neither time nor distance. Let that sink in... God knows neither time nor distance.

Some of you who ordered Easter Flowers will see them in the sanctuary. I know that some would like those plants at your home. If so, let me know and I, or one of the church's angels, will drop them by your front door.

We are holding Megan Johnson (nee: Rankin) in our prayer and love as she goes through her last hours of pregnancy. High Blood pressure has reared its ugly head.

And finally, I found these thoughts worthy of our consideration:

With all of us globally experiencing our common vulnerability to this virus we can learn the lesson that we are one in our humanity. No one is more important than anyone else. We are called to move beyond our own personal feelings and take in the whole. This is one of the gifts of television: we can see how people in countries other than our own are hurting.

What is going to happen to those living in isolated places or for those who don't have health care? Imagine the fragility of the most marginalized, of people in prisons, the homeless, or even the people performing necessary services, such as ambulance drivers, nurses, and doctors, risking their lives to keep society together?

Our feelings of urgency and devastation are not exaggeration: they are responding to the real human situation. We call upon God's presence to hold and sustain us in this time of prayer and lament. Love always means going beyond ourselves and including our neighbor. For in Christ, all of us are kin.

Let us join our hearts and minds together in worship:

The story of Palm Sunday tells of how people removed their cloaks and spread them out in front of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem.

The cloak we wear every day to present to the world is our outward face:

The mask we want others to see, and our protection against life's slings and arrows.

As we come to this time of worship may we be willing

to lay down our defenses and disguises,

at the feet of the One who sees us we really are.

And then, set free for worship, may we offer our praises with open hearts and lives.

Luke 19: 29-40

When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this, "The Lord needs it." So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of Yahweh God! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Sermon

I have been to the Holy Land twice now.

Ben Gurion Airport is near Tel Aviv and close to the Mediterranean.

90 minutes before we arrived, we were instructed to use the bathroom now because 30 minutes before arriving at the airport, everyone must stay in their seat.

No one is to get up out of their seat for any reason. Tight security.

Both times, after we deplaned, we were questioned about why we were visiting Israel. We had been warned that if we said anything other than "We are here on religious pilgrimage to see the Holy Sights", we would be questioned more closely.

You see, both times, my group met with Christians- Palestinian Christians- the living stones of the Holy Land. If I had mentioned to Israeli security, that we would be meeting with Palestinians, I would have been taken aside and asked to be more specific. I might have been denied entry into Israel.

I might have made it more difficult for the Christians we visited to move about; they might have even been arrested. There are about 160,000 Christians in Israel currently. They are all Israeli citizens but are not allowed to either vote or serve in the military.

This region is highly politicized. It is extremely difficult for Palestinian Christians or other Arabs to move from zone to zone to visit neighbors or other family members, let alone care for their olive trees. Slowly, systematically, deliberately the highly educated Christians are being squeezed out of their native land because the daily oppression that they experience is so prevalent and well established.

We tend to think of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem as this spontaneous joyful party with the whole city of Jerusalem there. It is more like a small peasant procession. It is, in some ways, what we would call street theater. He just "happened to find a colt" to sit upon. People just "happened to have cloaks and palm branches" to toss in front of him; remember Jesus was coming down from the Mount of Olives- the backside, if you will, of Jerusalem. The quiet side. Jesus is fulfilling a Messianic prophecy from the writings of the prophet Zechariah who said:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Here is Jesus fulfilling that prophecy and stirring up the unconnected, the unprivileged, the barely-squeaking-by people's hopes because, guess what?, they live under oppression; they could not move about without being stopped and questioned; if Rome had had an airport, it would have strict protocols like Israel does. The Jews in the time of Jesus chafed under the boot of Rome.

This was the first day of the week leading up to Passover. If we can believe the scholars, Jerusalem's population at the time of Jesus was about 40,000 inhabitants; however, at the Jewish festivals, Jerusalem swelled to about 200,000 people. That's right an additional 160,000 came into Jerusalem to worship in the Temple.

This did not go unnoticed by Rome. It was at these festivals that trouble broke out.

So there was another procession into Jerusalem that day. This procession came in the “front door” if you will. Up from the coast, from the Roman stronghold of Caesarea Maritima or “Caesarea of the Sea”. This is where Pontus Pilate lived for most of the year and where the majority of Roman soldiers were stationed. Much more pleasant to be near the lovely Mediterranean and its breezes than the inland and insular Jerusalem. If there was trouble elsewhere in the Empire, the soldiers could quickly be put on a boat. Roman was agile and kept peace by flexing its ruthless military might.

So Pontus Pilate entered Jerusalem that day as well. He led the conspicuous procession up from the Coast with all the considerable military pomp that was at his disposal. The point? so that the Jewish people would hear and see who was in charge. Rome and its military might- war horses decked out, foot soldiers in leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners unfurled, golden eagles (the symbol of Rome) mounted on poles, the marching of feet, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust. There was no mistaking the threat of Rome. This was a preemptive move. This was a clear warning that outbreaks would not be tolerated.

Pontus Pilate enters Jerusalem by the front gate with war horses and armored foot soldiers. Pontus Pilate wanted Jerusalem to know who was in charge

Jesus enters Jerusalem from the back on a donkey surrounded by singing peasants.

Two processions that day. Both planned. One celebrating might, threats and fear; the other procession celebrating the one who “comes in the name of God”, comes in the name of peace.

So these worlds are about to collide; there is not enough room in Jerusalem (the City of Peace) for the Pax Romana- peace by intimidation and the threat of violence- and the peace that God wishes to give to the nations.

That ruler does not come with military pomp and circumstance, but in humility, riding on a donkey. No Chariots, no war horses, no armor, no guns, no weapons, no need to conceal carry for there will be shalom- the fullness of life where each one’s basic needs are met, where everyone will sit under their vine and fig tree and be unafraid. Unafraid. At peace. Unafraid. At Peace. This is God’s dream for us all

Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Jesus’ procession embodied an alternative vision of how the world can be. Astonishment turning to curiosity, turning to desire, turning to belief.

The one we follow, Jesus, came unarmed into the City of Peace that day. Over the years, his way has proved to be the harder, the narrower road to take. Jesus died because he lived in freedom. Free from social constraints, free to eat with anyone whom he wanted, free to rejoice greatly even in the face of intimidation and oppression.

But Jesus' death was not the end of the story. No, His life is still animating our world. There is another way to live our life. It is not easy. People will call us names and denigrate our character. It is the way of Jesus, the way of being a servant, the way of becoming humble. It is the way of the one who led the other procession that day and gave us a great gift: Jesus tells us that we will become sources of living water, sources of shalom itself- where all are at peace.

Let us follow Jesus this week as he eats a last meal with his friends, is arrested, tried and flogged, and stumbles to the cross. A parable of suffering love. God so loves the world.... that he suffers with us. God shows us the way through suffering life into.... Well that message is for next Sunday. Let us stay right here and follow Jesus through this week.... What wondrous love is this?