

April 5, 2020  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Title: "Royal Entrance"  
Text: Mark 11: 4-10



We are used to waving palm branches today in joyful song of "Hosanna." We envision seeing Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, children putting palm branches down, and people throwing cloaks on ground. We join each year to begin this worship in celebration. Hosanna! King of Kings! We know how the story goes this week. We know that Friday will come, but we know Easter is there too. Some people even hop from Palms branches to Easter Lillies forgoing the descent into the valley of this week. Not this year. This year we are there. We are in the story. We are in the valley day by day as our story is unfolding. We are watching the valley of unknowing on holy week play out before us on daily news.

We might have thought we knew how our week was going to go, or our month, but none of us knew when we started lent - on Feb 26 that this is where we would be today. Who ever dreamed that churches would sit empty on Easter! Wasn't that one day we could count on a full house - every year? Not this year. We don't know how our stories are going to go anymore.

Perhaps this gives us the gift to enter holy week this year, sitting in the uncertainty of the present. This year we can imagine seeing this scene from those eyes of unknowing. Instead of us being one of the joyous ones to welcome Jesus - one who knows how this all works out. This year, become a bystander in Jerusalem.

You are a Jewish man or woman. You've lived in Jerusalem all your life. You haven't been out to those countryside gatherings in Galilee. You are just weaving your baskets or baking your bread or selling your wares trying to get by day to day. This day You go to the well to draw water, or the market square to hope for business, and you are startled by the commotion swelling up down the street. People start running past you. They are picking up palm branches. They are taking off coats as they run. They are merging into a crowd further down. This is no ordinary day; you pick up your pace to see what's happening.

It was no ordinary day really to being with. It is the start of holy week. There are many preparations to be made for the annual Passover feast. Jerusalem is buzzing with people. Travelers have come this week from all over, so there are lots of people squeezed into the narrow streets.

You can see the people that ran past you are now gathered around a man riding on a donkey. He looks to be a regular guy - nothing fancy about him, but everyone is acting like he's a celebrity. They shout- "Hosanna! Save us! King of kings!" That doesn't make any sense at all. Your own eyes tell you this is no king. He's not got a shred of royalty about him. He's on a donkey! not a stallion. There's a group of guys walking beside him, but they look pretty rough around the edges. This is most defiantly not a royal processional. You know what a royal processional looks like. You saw it earlier. On the other side of town, that guy coming into town knows how to throw a parade.

He rides in a royal chariot flanked by armor, sun glinting off of swords and shields and helmets. The Roman banners are snapping bright colors in the stiff breeze. Foot soldiers are marching loudly to the cadence of drums; the earth feels their vibration. The Roman authority over all Judea has come to Jerusalem and brought with him battalions.

They are flexing their power, showing off their strength. They are here because it is Jewish Passover week. They are not here to celebrate the feast; they are here to keep it subdued. All these people who have come from all over to celebrate together make the authorities nervous.

Passover means getting with family, setting the table, and remembering liberation! Passover is remembering Hebrew Liberation from Egyptian Pharaoh. They are celebrating the night they escaped slavery.

I suppose the Roman empire doesn't want this whole spirit of liberation getting out of hand with all the crowds. That's why the army rolled into town- to make sure the people remembered they were not liberated today. Rome ruled their lives now. That's what Empire royalty looks like - suppression of common people, exploitation of the working class, silencing opposition.

This guy on the donkey is not any of that. His followers aren't sparkling and shiny, most look like they could use a bath! They don't have fancy tapestry banners to wave. That's why they've picked up the palm fronds and turned their cloaks into a red carpet, so to say. But this guy, the one on the donkey, there's obviously something about him - a special charismatic draw. There's a conviction - a determination, you can see it in the set of his jaw and the sparkle of his eyes and the smile illuminating.

The crowds around him are joyous, not like those cowering on the other side of town. You wonder what came before this? What has happened to bring this guy to town and to bring these crowds around him? You ask someone near you. Who is this? What's going on?

The storytellers of the future will fill in the past for you one day.

Matthew will tell:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news, healing every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.... (Matt 9: 35) He healed the man with the withered hand and restored him to the community on the Sabbath.... (Matt 12: 14)

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet (Matt 22: 45)

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ...Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! Woe to you, blind guides! You fools! You snakes! You brood of vipers! Woe to you teachers and Pharisees, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.... .. when he had finished saying these things, The Chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. .. But they feared a riot among the people."

What came before this palm processional was a year of tension, anxiety, fear, death-threats-rising. The religious leaders were afraid of Jesus - encouraging the common people - telling them they had purpose and were worthy. He went about breaking the religious rules - upsetting traditions and customs. The change he talked about sounded like a revolution, turning the world upside down. That scared them. Almost since Jesus began, the leaders

were looking for a way to stop him. Now it is coming to a climax. Will the people revolt? The leaders see trouble ahead and uncertainty.

We are in this in-between this week as well. We have been told it is going to get worse. We have heard possibilities of Big numbers, 100,000 - 200,000 deaths - if we do as we have been told. We have seen what Italy and Spain and New York have foreshadowed for us. Can we fathom those images on the tv screen when to look outside and it looks okay?

We live in our holy week of unknowing this year; we don't know how this pandemic will end. So, now more than ever we turn to our ancestors for wisdom and hope. We look to those who survived the Great Depression. We look to those who wrote about surviving the black plague. We look to those who witnessed man's cruelty of Empire crushing innocents. We look to our faith ancestors in our sacred scriptures and hear our story that echoes through generations.

This week is about what God does in face of human fear. It's about God's goodness that is stronger than all else. It's about Divine commitment to bring new life into the world and the Way of Jesus that makes it possible for us yet.

Hear this story this week and we witness love that cannot be conquered or corrupted. Join your voice and hear the people sing once more of a new way, of a preferred future, of God's way of peace as surely as tomorrow comes!