

THE WORLD HAS GONE AFTER HIM



John 12: 12-19
Palm Sunday
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The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!” ¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: ¹⁵ “Do not be afraid, daughters of Zion. For behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” ¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸ It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹ The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. *Look, the world has gone after him!*”

Our 40 day Lenten journey nears its end, but this year, the deprivations of Lent will stay with us longer—another 30, 60 or maybe even 90 days. Palm Sunday normally marks the start of Holy Week, with its assault upon our senses, and it begins with Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem.

Donkeys are lowly and in their way, they “say” a lot: they are slow, stubborn, the perennial work animal of the poor. These are earthy animals and to be near one that has recently come in from winter pastures is to be overwhelmed by the smells of the earth. There are the palm buds we traditionally hand out at the front door, to be waved as worshipers walk down the aisle, then used by children to tease and tickle their siblings, or picked up and wielded like light sabers in the church yard. After a season of more reflective music during Lent, all the stops on the organ are opened and the sound shakes the ground beneath us. Holy Week involves our bodies, as a way of reminding ourselves of Christ’s bodily presence with us. Through the course of the week, it is precisely the body of Jesus that will be broken, and both his enemies and his friends will participate in that breaking.

Gates open and the procession begins. Thousands line the street, throwing flowers and laurels, waving madly, reaching to touch power as it passes them. Security guards watch the crowd for dissidents, agitators, and zealots, intent on doing harm. The man coming through the gate sits tall in the saddle, looking every bit the champion he is meant to be. A mantle of authority rests easily on his shoulders as he climbs higher to the center of the city, taking his rightful place as lord protector of this people. This is not a description of the

Palm Sunday procession. It is a description of Pontius Pilate, as he enters Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Pilate doesn't live in Jerusalem. The city is too volatile; the residents are not to be trusted. So Pilate lives in Caesarea by the Sea, surrounded by its mostly Gentile residents. Pilate comes to town trying to look like Alexander the Great, when he rode into Jerusalem 300 years early, on the back of his war horse.

When Jesus hears the crowds cry out using the word, Hosanna, that is when he decides to find a donkey and ride into the city not as a warrior, but as a servant. Palm branches were a national symbol. Pilate gets laurels, but palm branches indicate that the people see Jesus as a king who can rival Pilate. Those palm branches were like the American eagle or the Irish Shamrock. Hosanna is a cry that means "save us." It can be used as a proclamation, like God save the Queen, or it can be used as a prayer: Lord, save us." I think that in this setting, hosanna is used as a prayer, a prayer for Jesus: "God save the Son of David."

Hosanna, Lord, save us. God did and did not save the Son of David. The Gospel tells us of the resurrection (God did save) but also of the crucifixion (God did not save); one of the many two-fold truths about Jesus, fully human, fully divine. God's saving power is revealed in a unique and unusual way, through the cross and empty tomb. In saving Jesus by resurrection, the most powerful resource of all, God saved all who trust Jesus from the terror of death. The people's prayer for a deep salvation was answered.

There are no parades this year led by a donkey, but those of us with pets can get in touch with the earthiness of life by playing with our pets. We cannot gather face to face, but if you have an elderly friend, confined in a nursing facility, you can stand outside a first floor window and carry on a conversation through the glass. The sight of your face will be a small resurrection for someone who is quarantined.

We aren't able to stage a parade this year, but we can go on a long walk. Such a walk is an expression of absolute freedom and it can be accomplished in a safe and solitary way, near home or in the solitude outside of town. One of walking's great benefits is that it allows us time to reflect—on our lives, on our fate, on the state of the world, and figure things out. The Greek philosophers used to say, "It is solved by walking," and the New Testament is full of evidence that Jesus practiced that virtue often. The disciples on the road to Emmaus, for example, learned from Jesus that "it is solved by walking."

We won't be able to gather around the table this Holy Week either. Protestant reformers insisted that the table is only fenced by the Word of God, so we will wait to observe the sacrament for a time when we can appropriately unfence the table. We can try our hand at making bread—mixing up some flour and water and yeast, kneading the dough with our hands and placing it in a warm, dark place to rise; then punching it down and shaping it into loaves, placing it in the tomb of an oven until that dough is transformed into something fragrant, and nurturing, and good. Baking bread is theology enacted.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says “Holy Week arrives to gather us around the one true holy place of the Christian religion – Jesus himself – displayed to the world as the public language of our God.... This is a week for learning not management, not bargaining or rule-keeping, but naked trust in the naked gift of God.”

It is an observation that seems especially timely this year. Our world has not been so vulnerable since the world wars of the last century. Undisguised fear, stark mistrust, unadorned need; loneliness, alienation, unemployment, helplessness; this now is part of our daily routine. We want to do more than wash our hands and stay away from one another to contribute to the healing that we know is necessary. Every day we send our soldiers off to war—doctors, nurses, health care workers, not to mention all the essential employees who keep grocery stores open, deliver the mail, pick up our garbage, and remain the dwindling but important public face of our private lives. And whether we know it or not, every day we shelter in place, we become less human.

The tools that enable us to maintain a virtual community are invaluable—computer screens, I-Pads, cell phones, Facetime, Facebook, Zoom, Skype, and Duo. We are learning these technologies the way you learn a foreign language while living in a foreign country—we pick it up as we go along. We make mistakes along the way, take one step back and hope to take two steps forward. But all these tools and our steps toward their mastery do not add up to the true community of the church. We are the Body of Christ and that Body is not meant for virtual reality. The Word was made flesh, and holy week is especially a time to remember this frail flesh and how God has come down to us—condescended to us—in order to reveal that flesh is holy.

Brian Doyle remembers learning this truth at the Funeral Mass for his mother-in-law. “After the priest talked about the bread becoming the body of Christ, people were walking forward to receive bread and wine. And everyone in line, as they came to the front pew, touched my wife. Some bent down to hug her. Some touched her hair gently. Some just placed a hand on her shoulder. One woman reached down and cupped her face in her two hands for an instant. There is something about being human that knows words and pictures are not enough. We touch each other when we have no other way to speak. We speak many languages without words. We are so much wilder and wiser than we know. There are so many of us, when we find ourselves without words, we find the most amazing and eloquent languages; we sing with our hands. I have seen it happen. You have seen it too, if you think about it. It’s a little thing, but there’s a shimmer of something beyond the vast emptiness of this life.”

Jesus spent his ministry trying to persuade people that every person – every human being – is made in the image of God. Not just the healthy ones, not just the whole ones – everyone. In all the healing stories we have read this month, Jesus tells his disciples that the paralyzed, the blind, even the dead, are intended to reveal the glory of God. Jesus does not mean that such glory is only revealed through the cure. No, Jesus meant that the glory of

God resides in every human life. Sometimes we are simply too blind, too dead, to see it. But for those who have the eyes of faith, the glory of God is all around us, in the flesh.

We live in a grim and anxious age. Each day, we hear and see stories of impending doom, tales about our divisions, our warring madness, our love for all that is superficial and only beautiful on the surface. Depth of character, fullness of heart, courageous minds and mindful bodies – these things are in short supply. We are tempted to think that emptiness and chaos are now the new normal.

“You see,” the Pharisees complain on Palm Sunday, “the world has gone after him.”

Holy Week is an opportunity for us reveal that if the world has not yet fully gone after him, at least we have.

Every time you back down from a fight and find a way to make peace...

Every time you forgive someone or stand up for someone weaker than you – you are showing that you have taken the body of Christ’s death into yourself.

Every decision you make to offer a gesture of caring for the vulnerable, the aged, the children, the stranger... every time you protest the unfair treatment of a co-worker... every time you comfort someone whose anxiety and anger is getting the better of them, you show that you are prepared to walk with Christ.

Every time you reach out toward the unloved and unlovely, speak out in defense of someone who is being unjustly condemned, every time you take the time to teach your children and grandchildren that learning the ways of the Lord are just as important as soccer practice, every time you bow down in prayer for those being treated unjustly... you are walking toward Golgotha.

These remain the real, tangible things that reveal the image of God that is in us, the things that shape us as a Christian community and reveal the character of our faith to the world. This Holy Week, remember that we are bound together in the power of faith—a faith in Christ Jesus that overcomes the world.

Amen.