

Donkeys, Kings, and Crowded Places

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 5, 2020

Highland Park Presbyterian Church

In these days of “shelter-in-place” orders and social distancing, many of us find ourselves spending more time than usual in front of our computers or tv sets. When we’re not trying to work, we’re searching for something to distract us, to entertain us. We may turn to Netflix, or Amazon Prime, or a replay of the 2018 NCAA Basketball tournament. Many of our favorite shows were recorded months ago and we’re startled to see people so close together! They may even be shaking hands, or hugging each other – and they’re not even wearing masks! Not that long ago we were seeing overflowing political rallies, crowded basketball arenas, and congregations gathered in person to worship. It’s only been a few weeks, and already I find myself stifling the impulse to shout out – 6 feet apart! What are you thinking?

Reading this story of Jesus and his disciples riding right straight into that huge cheering crowd on their way to the feast in Jerusalem triggered a similar response in me this week. It’s such a familiar story; we retell it every year, happily waving our palm branches as we march into the sanctuary and imagine ourselves among those milling crowds so long ago, seeing Jesus perhaps for the first time, probably wondering along with others who this man could possibly be to draw such a crowd.

We read this story now, of course, knowing what kind of week lies ahead for this humble king and his followers. Tumult in the city of Jerusalem, betrayal, arrest, desertion, and death. And we will revisit those stories in a few moments. But today we’re caught up in the fervor of cheering crowds, shouting loud Hosannas, sensing that something new is about to happen, wondering again who this Jesus could be. Who would Jesus be now? Who is Jesus for us now?

Matthew paints a picture of Jesus as a King who turns the whole notion of Kingship, of leadership, upside down. He doesn’t come into the city on chariot or throne, but on two borrowed donkeys covered with second-hand cloaks. He doesn’t appear wearing a crown, but the ordinary clothes on his back. He isn’t

greeted with lilies or laurels, but with hastily gathered branches – and even more cloaks. He isn't surrounded by an army, but by a rag-tag group of rough rural Galileans. He doesn't command obedience or enforce his will with military might. He enters humbly, crying over the lostness of his people, seeking to serve the least and the lost.

We are inundated with alarming stories of illness and death, financial calamity, and social isolation. All signs tell us that our world will get worse before it gets better, that we must travel through the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday before we celebrate new life, when death is finally swallowed up in the victory of the Resurrection.

Reading this Palm Sunday story again this year I experienced that “6 feet apart” impulse again. All those people! They're not staying home, they're not playing it safe, not one is wearing mask. And then I felt sad, or truth be told, a little jealous. *They* weren't ordered to stay at home. *They* were free to travel, to relish the celebrating crowds; they were even welcomed. It was so much better for us when we could all be together, too. Would Jesus still enter Jerusalem if the corona virus threatened life and health, if Palestine and its neighbors were caught in the throes of a pandemic?

As the severity and breadth of our COVID-19 pandemic became clear weeks ago, some pastors and church leaders were proposing that we postpone our celebrations of Holy Week – or at least of Easter – until we could once again gather together in our churches to cherish the return of new life. Others reminded us that the events of Holy Week did not originally take place in church buildings at all, but in either in an upper room or out in the open. They reminded us, too, that whether we gather in our usual ways or not, whether or not we are gathered instead in the safety of our homes, the gentle humble King Jesus enters our cities and our lives anyway. That rock rolled over the door of that ancient tomb could not hold back the bursting forth of new life that was God's plan, could not stop God's bold determination to bring new life out of the darkness of death.

Presbyterian Pastor Jill Duffield said it poignantly this week: “As we grieve what is lost this year - the waving palms, the soaring swell of the organ, the joy of singing with one another in the sanctuary, the touch of handshakes and hugs - we can be sure Jesus meets us where we are, no matter how we are. Jesus will not stop on

the outskirts of Jerusalem or on the fringes of our lives. He enters fully into the city knowing what's to come. He enters fully into our lives, knowing our doubts, failings, denials, betrayals, misunderstandings and disappointments. He comes humbly toward us, accepting whatever we offer, a palm branch or tattered coat, exuberant praise or mumbled hope, knowing that soon he will go to the cross for our sake.”

Amen