

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

PRELUDE “*Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to worship. We’ve arrived once again at the opening of Holy Week, and gather today to remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, fully aware that we are entering a story that moves quickly from a welcoming parade to confrontation and challenge, where a religious festival includes the breaking of bread, sharing a cup and a life poured out. We’re asked to stay by Jesus’ side through betrayal and desertion, arrest and conviction, suffering and death – so that we might also rejoice with him on the other side, in the incomprehensible joy of an empty tomb. I invite you to walk with me through this week, that together, we might walk with Jesus and with God.

As is our custom, I am preparing Maundy Thursday worship. Many of you have helped with that preparation, and I’ll be in touch Thursday afternoon with a video link for the service. I’ll also let you know when the communion bread will arrive at the church, probably Tuesday or Wednesday, so that we can share the meal together. Please be prepared with something to drink that will represent the cup.

And as I said in my email the other night, you are invited to come together for the celebration of Easter in our building at 9:30 next Sunday. We expect people to wear masks and maintain a social distance of 6-feet. We will record the worship service, and then send out the link later in the day, probably mid-afternoon. Both of these links will also be available on our website, as always.

People of God, please join me now as we gather together for Palm Sunday worship.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come to prepare for the holiest of weeks.

We will journey through praise, with joy on our lips; we will travel through betrayal and death, cradling hope deep in our hearts

Jesus leads us through this week, and we will follow, for he is the life we long for, he is the Word who sustains us.

We wave palm branches in anticipation, we lay our love before him, to cushion his walk

Setting aside all power, glory, and might, he comes: modeling humility and obedience for all of us.

Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the One who brings us the kingdom of God.

(Thom Shuman, *When the Broken Gather*)

SONG “*All Glory, Laud and Honor*”

All glory, laud and honor To Thee, Redeemer King,
To whom the lips of children Made sweet hosannas ring:
Thou art the King of Israel, Thou David’s royal Son,
Who in the Lord’s name comest, The King and blessed One!

To Thee, before Thy passion, They sang their hymns of praise;
To Thee, now high exalted, Our melody we raise:
Thou didst accept their praises – Accept the praise we bring,
Who in all good delightest, Thou good and gracious King!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (inspired by Psalm 31:9-16)

O Holy One, we are too distressed to notice that you join us in the parade. We are too deeply grieved to be aware that you sit beside us at the table. We are too busy sighing. We are too busy talking. We have insisted upon our own answers. We proclaimed our own knowledge about why bad things happen, about why the rich get richer, about why the world feels so broken. We have assured ourselves that this is the way that things must be, but this life is in your hands. Our lives are in your hands.

O Holy One, speak to us. Fill our silences. Comfort us with your love so that we may find your understanding. Trust us to find your answers when we finally tire from our own. Save us, O Holy One, with your steadfast love. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God opens your ears. God speaks when you are silent. God approaches you in the parade and at table in your denial and your praise to be your help. Now and always. **Amen.**

(Elsa Cook, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 11:1-11

Joyce Dunphy

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

SERMON

If you were there, you had an agenda. If you didn't have an agenda, this was the last place you wanted to be. Sort of like the way Ben and I view restaurants on Valentine's Day and box stores the day after Thanksgiving. Jerusalem, a few days before Passover, was no place for a Sunday stroll to enjoy the spring weather and check out daffodil shoots and crocus blossoms. That would make as much sense as being a casual observer in Washington DC on January 20 of this year. If it's not compelling in the depths of your soul, now is not the time. Come back later.

And yet, the place was packed. Passover was coming, and every faithful Jew dreamed of celebrating their liberation from Egyptian slavery in Jerusalem and at the temple. The faithful who lived there invited family to come and celebrate with them. Those who could afford it had booked a room at the Ramada and were eager to offer a sacrifice at the temple. Those who couldn't take on anything resembling a splurge packed sleeping bags and coolers and were prepared to bunk down in a corner, if they didn't see someone who would take them in. This gathering of the masses to celebrate their freedom made Rome very nervous, so they sent special forces to keep an eye on things and maintain order. They were prepared to extinguish any wayward thought before it had a chance to be passed in sideways glances or secret handshakes; while some blended in and watched in secret, others paraded

their presence and broadcast their strength. They had the place locked down and that was exactly how they intended to keep it until the festival was over and the crowds had dispersed. Jews chafed while Rome strutted, and everyone wondered who would strike the match that would ignite the powder keg.

A few days before Passover, like every year, governor Pilate arrives in Jerusalem. He pauses on the western outskirts of Jerusalem and waits for the troops to assemble. As soon as he can parade with an excessive show of military pomp and circumstance, he leads the large group of cavalry and foot soldiers and rides an impressive stallion into city center. The air is filled with the clomp of hooves, short military commands and drum beats, while the inhabitants of and visitors to Jerusalem stand shell shocked on street corners and in alleys. Never allowed to forget the knee of Rome that sits on their necks, they slip back out of sight and hold their breath until the spectacle has passed.

This year, while Rome was assembling its war machine, another parade was gathering on the eastern side of town. Jesus and his friends were nearing the city when Jesus sent two of them ahead with clear instructions: go into the village five paces ahead of you, and the first house that you reach will have a colt that's never been ridden tied up just inside the gate. Untie it and bring it here. If any one asks you what you're up to, just say that the Lord needs it, and will send it back immediately. No harm, no foul; we'll only be gone a minute. Whether that was all prearranged secret code, a clairvoyant Jesus or a shockingly trusting farmer, it went exactly as he described, and the next thing they know, the two disciples are reappearing on the horizon, donkey in tow. While they were away, the rest of Jesus' companions were making their own parade preparations, writing slogans on cardboard, (Hosanna, Jesus saves, Jesus for King), cutting branches off trees, collecting coats to use in paving the way. And once the pieces are all in place, they head toward town, clearly on a collision course, headed straight for Pilate.

Even if we didn't know the story line and where this little demonstration is headed, once we feel the tension and see the situation, I think you know that the first question on the end of my tongue is whether Jesus has a death wish. Clearly, this was not the time for him to make his appearance in Jerusalem. And if he did feel compelled to be there to observe the Passover, this was possibly the worst way he could arrive on the scene. It doesn't take a PhD to understand that, if he is going to be in Jerusalem, the center of both power and wealth in first-century Palestine, for the Passover when Rome turns out in full force, he needs to play it low key, inconspicuous and do everything in his power to fly well below the radar. None of which Jesus seems capable of or interested in doing.

I, for one, don't believe that Jesus had a death wish, despite all appearances to the contrary. I really resonate with the writer who said that, "...the crucifixion was neither Jesus' goal nor God's plan! It was a consequence of Jesus' courageous message of God's dream of an alternative empire..." (Wolfgang Stahlberg, *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, page 342) Jesus' entire life and life work, his heart and soul were grounded in an alternative vision of the realm of God, for how God works in the world and what God envisions for our life together. That was a vision about which Jesus was so passionate and so committed that he was determined to take it to Jerusalem – despite the risks and the probable cost. He trusted God, he believed in what he was called to be about, and he had no intention of playing it safe and sitting idly by while God's people suffered under Rome's heel. If that meant he'd end up on a cross, so be it.

Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a colt, flanked by friends and followers, grounded in the prophetic promises of justice and peace, committed to protecting life and restoring hope. And clearly, his commitments and his vision were tapping into something very deep in his companions. People who were waiting for a Messiah to save them; hoping against hope that the world would be turned upside down, and that God would right what was wrong in their world. They were on the brink of giving up

and could feel the ancient promises beginning to slip out of their hands, promises that lately seemed more like fairy tales than a deposit in their grandchildren's future. In his life and love, his courage and compassion, his vision and voice, Jesus had reignited their hope and restored dreams they had forgotten they had. And now, as he made his entry into Jerusalem, with his eyes fixed only on the will and way of God, they walked by his side and chanted their hosanna slogans, cheering him on and welcoming him home.

When you think about how hard it became for Jesus' friends and followers to hold on to that hope and confidence as the week unfolded, it's no great surprise to me that most days it's at best a dim and fading memory for us. We used to occasionally dare to hope, but after the year we've had, we've reduced those hopes to just wanting to hang on so we can make it through to the other side. We've been held in the grip of a pandemic that has kept us away from loved ones and sheltering at home, while millions line up for food, struggle for breath in hospital ICUs and starve for the lack of human touch. We watch homes being ripped to shreds by savage tornadoes. Flags spend more time at half staff after acts of violence than they do at the top of the pole. Most days, it doesn't much matter which leader or party we pin our hopes on; they all disappoint. What hope do we have that the poor will really be fed, that the unemployed will have good, decent jobs, that children will not be used and abused by people we thought we could trust, that the planet will survive long enough for us to make the corrections it demands of us? What hope does the gospel offer against the despair that grips so many?

One writer addresses that question by saying, "I am convinced that... the one true thing we can offer is a vision of the world that is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' kingdom is not what the people expected or hoped for when he rode in to the whoops and shouts. Jesus' kingdom does not magically undo the tragedy or pain or injustice of the world in which we live. Still it does exist, even on the streets of the city or on the cross of a condemned man. The kingdom exists because God exists, and we have witnessed the depth of God's love for the world in the daring courage of his Son, riding in to face his death - and resurrection." (Karen Chakoian, *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, page 343)

Jesus didn't take his place in that Palm Sunday parade because he expected a hero's welcome to open into days of celebration and ease. He entered Jerusalem on a colt, surrounded by a small group of followers and friends, because he carried a vision in his heart of the realm of God, and he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that what he was peddling was precisely what the people needed to transform their lives and set them free from all that oppressed them. He believed in the power of God's love to reignite their hope, restore their joy, heal their wounds and nourish them body and soul. He entered Jerusalem because he had to share what he had with the people who needed it most; and if there was a price to be paid for the delivery he was there to make, so be it; he'd readily pay it.

As we celebrate Jesus' commitment to sharing with us the ways and will of God, even as he paraded the streets of Jerusalem, I think this text calls to us and asks if we will join him in the march. If you hear that as a call to literally walk alongside others in a parade, fine. But first of all and most important of all, it's a call to carry his vision of God's realm in our hearts, letting it take root and grow, so that it might spill out and spread into this world. A vision of mercy and peace, grounded in the reality of hope, colored and shaped by a love that welcomes all, that never gives up and never gives in, that refuses to take no for an answer, that heals and holds, cradles and confronts, feeds and forgives. May it be so. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Jim and Penny as they continue to recover from COVID, and Jim's brother Robert who is hospitalized with it.

Evvy May, who's working to regain strength after a few days in the hospital

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and beloved God, as we stand at the opening of another Holy Week, we ask you to walk us through the teachings and trials, struggles and sacrifices, wisdom and witness of Jesus' last days. Open our ears and our hearts to more fully comprehend the words he spoke, the welcome he extended, the forgiveness with which he freed and cleansed even those who betrayed him, the love by which he lived and served, died and rose again. Plant your truth and your love deep within our hearts, that we might more fully understand your vision for our life together, the kingdom of heaven that you seek to make more and more present on earth, and the role that you would have us play in ushering it in.

We pray, O God, for the wounds and weariness from which so many suffer. For those who are continuing to struggle against COVID: the ravages of the virus, the consequences of the pandemic, the cost that continues to be paid by far too many. We give thanks for the healing that Jim and Penny have already experienced, and ask you to continue to heal and strengthen them, as well as Jim's brother Robert. Bless, support and strengthen Evy May, as she reaches for you and for joy. We rejoice in the gifts that are beginning to emerge as isolated ones experience the joy of a hand to hold and grandchildren to hug after a year of only seeing the face of loved ones through a glass or on the computer screen. For the promise of travel, the lifting of restrictions, the hope of returning to school. As we emerge from our holding cells, keep us mindful of the cautions and ongoing risks, that we might continue to care for the safety and wellbeing of all your people, and to recognize the ways in which our actions impact others.

Holy God, our country is in need of your healing and holding this week, as it has been for so many weeks. We pray for the lives lost by gunfire, first in Georgia and then in Colorado, and for the families and friends, communities and businesses left behind to make sense of that which makes no sense. We pray for all those enduring monster tornadoes and extreme weather; for the stream of people arriving on our southern border, the desperation that prompted them to leave home, and the chaos and confusion now confronting lawmakers and border patrol; for the political divisions that continue to distort and damage the fabric of our shared life. Guide, bless and lead our leaders; give them wisdom and courage, strength and patience, compassion and understanding.

Hear our prayers, O God. And hear us as we join together in the prayer Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

This first Sunday that we worshiped on line, way back last March, I didn't include anything about an offering in what I said. As I thought about it through the next week, I quickly decided that I wouldn't repeat that mistake – because every worship needs to include an offering. To me, that's not about passing the plates; it's not even about gathering up money to pay the church's bills – though we all know we need that. We need an offering in our worship, because it's a time that invites us to consider how we will respond to the Word of God, the call of God for our lives, and the grace of Holy Spirit present and active in our lives. Day by endless day, we are richly blessed by the love and mercy of God, healing and forgiving us, nurturing and supporting us, blessing and equipping us. How will we pass along to others the abundance of mercies that we receive like an everflowing stream from the heart of God? What will we do to pay forward the love and light by which we are led? What are the gifts that God showers on us, and how do we put them to work as an expression of our gratitude? There is no doubt in my mind that each of us have gifts to share, and I know from personal experience that all of you give of what you have and who you are to communicate love, to encourage community, to bless the lives of others. Thank you – for all that you do, for all that you are, for all that you give.

SONG *“My Song is Love Unknown”*

My song is love unknown, my Savior’s love to me,
Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake my God should take frail flesh and die?
My God should take frail flesh and die?

Sometimes they threw down palms and sweetest praises sang.
Hosannas and glad psalms through streets and markets rang.
Then “Crucify!” is all their breath, for blood and death they thirst and cry;
for blood and death they thirst and cry.

I sing my plain belief, one song my heart out-pours:
Never was pain and grief, never was love like yours.
This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend;
I all my days could gladly spend.

BENEDICTION *“Sending Words”*

And now we lay down the palm branches. And with them we lay down our belief that there is another way for you to be God. As the last echo of the final alleluia fades, so does our hope that this journey can end in any other way. The week stretches ahead glory-less and pain-full. Whether we walk with all faith or none we look towards the cross, knowing it is both the most human and most divine of all journeys. Travel the road with courage, with love, and with the uneasy peace that is the gift of faith into this holiest of weeks. Amen.

(Cheryl Lawrie, <http://holdthisspace.org.au/>)