

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

April 10, 2022

Palm/Passion Sunday

PRELUDE “All Glory, Laud and Honor”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Blessed is the Messiah who comes in humble victory.

Blessed is the Savior who rides through hope-songs and stone-weeping.

Blessed is the Messiah who entered the dangerous streets of Jerusalem long ago.

Blessed is the Savior who enters the uncertain terrain of our lives today.

(Maren C. Tirabassi and Joan Jordan Grant, *An Improbable Gift of Blessing*)

HYMN No. 174 “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna”

Hosanna, loud hosanna The little children sang;
Through pillared court and temple The lovely anthem rang;
To Jesus, who had blessed them Close folded to His breast,
The children sang their praises, The simplest and the best.

“Hosanna in the highest!” That ancient song we sing,
For Christ is our Redeemer, The Lord of heaven our King;
O may we ever praise Him With heart and life and voice,
And in His blissful presence Eternally rejoice!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

It is relatively easy for us to recruit someone to go and gather branches to spread in the church today. And we can easily find music and a few good words to help us to remember and re-enact Palm Sunday. But what if You arrived inviting us to really lay down something important to us to acknowledge Your arrival? What if we knew the imminence of the danger that accompanies You, or sensed that the authorities were watching us as we worship? How then, Jesus, would we meet You today. and what would we spread before You? And how would we regard humility from the One we hope will save the world? Palm Sunday Jesus, help us to see how and where You enter our world today, and what You ask us to lay at your feet, and how we may welcome You in.

Amen. (Ann Siddall Stillpoint Spirituality Centre website. <https://stillpointsa.org.au/>, edited)

SCRIPTURE READING

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Luke 19:28-44

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied 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 king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
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." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

SERMON

Finally! They've been talking about, looking toward and moving in the direction of Jerusalem for what seems like forever, and finally it's within reach. According to how Luke tells the story, way back in chapter 9, just after he started talking about rejection and suffering, betrayal and death, he set his nose on the trail of Jerusalem like a hound dog on a scent, and that's been their intended destination ever since. Who knows how much time has actually passed, but it's been a good long while. He's been busy teaching and healing, welcoming and praying, equipping the twelve and sending them out, and then receiving them back and listening to their excitement about all they'd seen and done, accomplished and witnessed. More than once, they wondered if he'd forgotten about his plan and shifted his sights, but about the time the thought popped into their minds, he was back on the road, and clearly on track for the holy city.

Now they are just about there, and things are really beginning to come together. They've made it to the top of the Mount of Olives, which was exactly what Zechariah had predicted centuries before, that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem from the mountain top. Once they were all on top, he calls two of the

disciples over and gives them explicit instructions to go out and fetch his ride: Go into the next village; as you enter it, you'll find a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it to me. If anyone has the audacity to challenge your claim on their colt, say to them, the Lord needs it. Which is exactly what happens, right down to the challenge that is satisfied with the answer he gave. I've never quite figured out if this was a prearranged set of secret code, or just a shockingly flexible farmer who really didn't care one way or the other about that colt, but all went exactly as Jesus told them it would.

As soon as they returned with the colt, Jesus climbed aboard it and the small gathering of followers set out on the path that leads into Jerusalem. In Luke's version of the story, there aren't any palm branches; instead people take off their coats and lay them on the ground, creating their version of a red carpet to honor their leader. Having their cloaks spread all over the road also reminded them of a story from 2 Kings in which the great and mighty military leader Jehu was ushered in with a carpet of cloaks; and within a few verses, was off again, headed out to slay his rivals with a bloody vengeance. Clearly, Jesus' followers were hoping for victory, and many who gathered around him that day craved a decisive thrashing of Rome. As they walked, they sang and celebrated, praising God joyfully with loud voices, giving thanks for the deeds of power they'd witnessed at Jesus' hands. Together, they sang verses from Psalm 118: Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!

It isn't a large crowd, and Luke's version tells us it was primarily made up of followers of Jesus; but there are enough of them and they are excited enough to cause more than a little commotion, at which point some of the Pharisees standing near by approach Jesus and advise his disciples to dial back the noise. It's hard to tell: maybe it was their use of that word "king" that had them so uneasy, or their ragtag little parade heading straight into city center, where they know Pilate and his henchmen will be waiting. So they urge Jesus, please, tone it down – you know as well as we do that this isn't heading anywhere good, he responds, this is not a celebration that I or you or anybody else can silence; if these followers of mine turn mute, the stones will pick up their shouts and carry them on. All creation is in on this joyful celebration; there's no putting the genie back in the bottle now.

It's a complicated moment, overflowing with under currents and overtones. The disciples are singing about peace, celebrating the peace of heaven, while harkening back to Jesus' birth when the angels sang of peace on earth. The Pharisees think they're trying to keep the peace, while his followers are longing for a military victory that will overthrow the Roman oppressors and usher in the long awaited reign of peace. At which point, Jesus comes around a bend in the road, sees the city of Jerusalem spread out in front of him, and begins to weep. Once the emotion settles back enough for him to be able to speak, he sings a love song of longing and heartbreak: Jerusalem! If only today you knew the things that make for peace, but you do not. These things are hidden from your eyes.

That's one of those verses that has always tugged hard at my very core, as I hear and feel Jesus' longing lament for the possibility of peace. And for reasons that may be very clear to you, it's even more powerful this year than many. I watch the news from Ukraine and Afghanistan, from our own city streets and schools spread across this country, from the halls of power in Washington as well as Boise, and everything in me cries out, pleading that he tell us, please tell us, what are the things that make for peace? What are the things that are hidden from our eyes, and where can we find them? How do we take off the blindfold and remove the barriers? Help us, before we destroy ourselves!

I really don't have much in the way of answers, especially not answers that will satisfy the panic and anguish I feel about what's happening in Ukraine. But I pick up clues when I look at Jesus' life and ministry, and especially his time in Jerusalem that led up to his death. I see in him a person overflowing with a willingness and an ability to offer forgiveness to those who have done wrong and who have caused harm, even those who nailed him to a cross. He took the time to be present to people in need, to

notice pain and suffering, to truly see people overlooked and rejected by others; he didn't seek to claim power over anyone else, but found his power in a life of service. He spoke the truth in love, and made love the primary verb of his life, reaching and caring, tending and healing, teaching and welcoming. And as today's passage from Philippians says, he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave; and he humbled himself, and became obedient to God – and no one but God.

I've witnessed two examples this week that have stuck with me as possible symbols of the things that make for peace. One came from an episode of *Chicago Fire* from a couple of months ago. When the new lieutenant, Stella Kidd, tried to make phone contact with an official in the Chicago Fire Department, and that person hung up on her, she said, no one hangs up on Stella Kidd, and then she moved into action on behalf of another fire fighter. Someone she believed was being wrongly accused and who stood alone and unsupported. As she prepared to lay her own career on the line for the sake of this other firefighter, her fiance stopped her and challenged her: Stella, you're just coming into your own as a leader; you're getting known and going places, do you really want to put all of that on the line for this? To which she said, without a moment's pause, what good is leadership if we only use it when it's comfortable and easy? I believe living with that kind of courage, integrity, and yes, vulnerability, will make a huge difference in the world we live in.

And then there's a story I saw a couple of times this week on Facebook, the story of a teacher who, every Friday afternoon asks her 11-year old students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they'd like to sit the following week. They know their lists may or may not be honored. She also asks them to nominate one student they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her, and every Friday afternoon, after the students go home, that teacher takes out those slips of paper, places them in front of her and studies them. She looks for patterns: Who is not getting requested by anyone else? Who doesn't even know who to request? Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated? Who had a million friends last week and none this week? Truth be told, this teacher isn't looking for a new seating chart or exceptional citizens, but for lonely children, children who are struggling to connect with others, ones who are falling through the cracks, whose gifts are going unnoticed by their peers. She asks, who's being bullied and who's doing the bullying? Week after week, she goes in search of the ones who need adults to step in and teach them how to make friends, how to ask others to play, how to join a group, or how to share their gifts with others. When she was asked how long she's been using this system, she said, ever since Columbine – because she believes that violence begins with disconnection, that outward violence begins as inner loneliness. She said, she watched the tragedy of Columbine knowing that children who aren't being noticed will eventually resort to being noticed by any means necessary. And she's spent the years since then, turning that around for more children than I can even imagine.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem, surrounded by followers singing songs of peace. And then he stands on the edge of Jerusalem, and on the edge of Kiev, in the rubble that is Afghanistan, in empty classrooms and legislative chambers, and in the hearts of grieving mothers and fathers, communities and countries, and weeps because of the dream of peace that lives on his heart and mind. And then he moves on, to give himself freely and without reservation, to live a vulnerable love and to serve a mighty God. As Kathryn Shifferdecker writes, "This year, as every year, we begin Holy Week in praise of a king whose power is not that of tanks and fighter planes, drones and supersonic missiles. This week, we see the power of God to do something that no army can do: to give life, not destroy it; to change hearts; and to destroy the power of sin and death once and for all." (*Working Preacher* for April 10, 2022) Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN No. 173 *"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 REQUESTS

Gail Carlson, hip replacement surgery
June Gilseth, Gail's mother, recovering from a serious fall
Janine, Dallas' daughter, surgery this week

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. Guide us as we invite that mind that was in Jesus to live and take root in our minds; plant your truth and your love deep within our hearts, that we might more fully understand your vision for our life together, the realm 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, Gracious God, for the wounds and weariness under which so many struggle: those whose bodies, minds and spirits hunger for your healing touch; for those doing the hard work of recovery, those facing in to surgery, those who have lost hope and struggle to find a reason to get out of bed in the morning. We pray for those who grieve, for caregivers who grow weary, for those who wrestle day after day to find and pay for child care, and those who search for a place to live that they can afford. For those who struggle to find their way in the aftermath of tornadoes and severe storms, rising prices and crumbling support systems.

Holy God, we hear – and feel deep within our hearts – Jesus' cry of love and anguish over the city of Jerusalem, longing for them to know the things that make for peace. Blessed One, shine your light on us and on our world that we might yet learn how to live and walk together in peace. We pray for the city of Jerusalem, once again torn apart by terrorist attacks that deepen the already hostile divide between Israelis and Palestinians. For the revelation of new atrocities in Ukraine in the midst of a war that grows more destructive with each passing day, while accusations of war crimes and genocide grow louder. For the people of Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria; for the violence in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala that drives people to the US border in search of shelter and asylum. For the violence in our own country that threatens people in their homes, that profiles people by the color of their skin, that renders schools and grocery stores unsafe. And for the chasms of difference that pit us against each other, hurling accusations rather than forging bonds of cooperation. Show us, Holy One, the path that leads toward peace. Infuse us with wisdom, ground us in mercy, plant us in love and lead us in your ways and toward your peace.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

One of the hymns we often sing this time of year includes a verse:
Were the whole realm of nature mine,

That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

As we consider what offering we will give to support the work of the church and to respond to those in need around us and throughout the world, let us consider the overflowing generosity of the love of God, and ask what we can give in response to such abundance?

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving God, as we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and into our lives, we offer our gifts as expressions of praise and signs of welcoming spirits. Use what we give to pave the way for your work in the world, to encourage the church to stride forth proclaiming your love for all humanity. We pray humbly and confidently in our Savior's name. Amen.

(Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN No. 183 "Beneath the Cross of Jesus"

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand -
The shadow of a mighty Rock Within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, A rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heart, And the burden of the day.

Upon that cross of Jesus Mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One Who suffered there for me;
And from my smitten heart with tears Two wonders I confess -
The wonders of redeeming love And my unworthiness.

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/>)