

Sunday, April 5, 2020

Palm/Passion Sunday (Year A)

Matthew 21.1-11; Matthew 26.26-30, 36-56, 27.11-60

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/246765186455264/>

(Sermon begins at about 31:30)

“The Geography of Holy Week”

Today we begin our journey through Holy Week. The journey we will travel with Jesus through the events of what we know as Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. Most years, as I reflect on this journey, I am captivated by the radical changes and jarring reversals that occur in the short arc of this story. From the lightness and joy of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the darkness and despair of Good Friday. But this year, I am seeing the journey differently. Yes, there is still the radical shift in tone, the jarring reversals in temperament. But considering where we are as a world, I see Jesus’ Holy Week journey through the eyes of a people thrown straight into a Good Friday situation. Bypassing the joy and light and going straight to despair and darkness.

As I reflect on the two Gospel readings for this day—the Gospel of the Palms telling of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the Passion Gospel telling of his journey from the Last Supper to his arrest to his trial to his crucifixion at Golgatha—I am struck by the geography of his journey. And the parallels with the geography that we currently inhabit as a world, and particularly as a people who follow Jesus. Not just who follow him through Holy Week, but who follow him in all areas of our lives the other 51 weeks of the year.

Having been in Israel and walked the same route that Jesus took from Bethphage to Jerusalem, I am reminded of the geography of the route of Jesus’ triumphal entry itself. He began in Bethphage, a village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about a mile east of Jerusalem. He rode on a donkey over the crest of the Mount of Olives and down the western slope. As he mounted the crest, he would have had a clear view of Jerusalem stretching before him. The nearest part of the city would have been the eastern wall of Jerusalem, adjacent to the Temple Mount. As he rode along, he would have had a clear view of the Temple. And probably of the other key locations he would “visit” in the coming week: the high priest’s house and the headquarters of Pontius Pilate. And looking beyond, to the other side of the city, a view of Golgatha. Continuing down the Mount of Olives, Jesus would have passed through what was (and still is) a massive Jewish cemetery that occupies much of that side of the Mount of Olives. As he left the cemetery, he would have ridden right through, or at least adjacent to, the Garden of Gethsemane. And from there, across the Kidron Valley and into what is known as the Beautiful Gate, which leads right into the Temple Mount.

I wonder, as he made this journey, what Jesus must have been thinking. We don’t know exactly what Jesus knew and when he knew it. But we do know that he was aware that he was approaching the end of his earthly mission and that it would end in his death. But if he did know specifically what was going to happen, what would have gone through his mind as he

rode ever closer to Jerusalem, seeing laid before him the very places that would figure prominently in his final days? The irony of his triumphal entry taking him through a cemetery, knowing that he went to his own death. The irony of his triumphal entry where he would be declared King of the Jews taking him through the Garden of Gethsemane, where he would be betrayed by one of his closest allies and arrested by Jewish soldiers as a common criminal. The irony of the triumphal entry taking him through the Beautiful Gate, leading to a fate that would be far from beautiful.

For us, given where we are, there is also a certain irony as we begin our journey through Holy Week. While this week grows increasingly dark, we know that it ends with the light and joy of Easter. Yet, we enter it during a dark time of pandemic with increasing illness and mounting deaths. During a time when we cannot even begin to see the light and joy of it ending.

Appropriately, there are specific events in the Gospel of the Palms and the Passion Gospel that speak to where we are right now. Sometimes in ironic ways, sometimes in prophetic ways, as we walk with Jesus on his final journey through Holy Week in our own unique way. In a way that we never could have imagined.

We are told in the Gospel of the Palms that a large crowd gathered to witness Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem and that they went ahead of him waving branches and shouting "Hosanna in the highest heavens!" We normally re-enact this with a blessing of palm fronds and then processing into the church. But alas, not this year. This joyous part of the Palm Sunday liturgy has been overshadowed by—and as a result, eliminated because of—the darkness of the times in which we live. It's almost as if we have bypassed the joyful celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry and gone straight to the darkness of Good Friday.

At his last Passover meal with his closest friends, we are told that "Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" He then says: "I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." We could echo those same words of Jesus. For we will not be able to eat of the bread or drink of the fruit of the vine this Maundy Thursday, when we normally commemorate the Last Supper. Even more significant for us, we will not be able to celebrate the Eucharist, to share in Christ's Body and Blood as he commands us to do, until we are finally able to come together again in-person. In some ways, that seems as far away right now as the time when Jesus shares it with us in his Father's kingdom.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." Something that they do not seem to be able to do. And here we are, wanting, longing, to be with Jesus in his final hours, and yet, we are not able to. At least not together in our beloved church. But Jesus' implied message to his three closest disciples, even in that dark time, is "stay faithful." And that is his message to us. His challenge to us. Even in these dark times, stay faithful.

In the dark hour before his arrest, Jesus prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Isn’t that our prayer, as well, in this dark hour in which we find ourselves? That this may pass from us, and soon.

On Good Friday, after his trial and conviction, Jesus was led to Golgatha carrying his cross. We are told that along the way the soldiers compelled Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross. Not something that Simon would have particularly chosen to do. He was just an innocent bystander. And isn’t that where we are? Who we are? The situation we are in right now—a horrible pandemic, ordered to stay at home, isolated from one another—is certainly not of our own choosing. We have been forced, like Simon, to take up this cross.

And finally, while hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And what about us? Isn’t that our cry, as well? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?”

This pandemic has caused us to jump straight from the joy and triumphalism that we experienced mere weeks ago, straight to the darkest moments of Good Friday. In an instant, we were thrust into this, with no time to really prepare. It’s almost as if we were thrown straight into the tomb, at least metaphorically. But there is something in the whole story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the ensuing events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday that is unwritten, but is so strongly implied. Something that Jesus knew even as he traveled from Bethphage, through the cemetery, past the Garden of Gethsemane, through the Beautiful Gate; and several days later as he shared his final meal with his closest friends, was then arrested, tried, convicted, and sent to his death on the cross. He knew that this was not the end. There is more to the story. As he told his disciples, on the third day everything would change. He would change everything.

And while we may have been thrown into the darkest part of our own story, we too are assured that this is not the end. We will not stay stuck at Good Friday forever. Okay, it won’t happen on the third day. We’re already on the 17th day in our metaphorical tomb. But we are assured that there will be a “third day” for us, when all that has gone before will change. Because what Jesus knew throughout his triumphal entry and particularly during his Passion was that out of illness always comes healing, out of despair always comes joy, and out of darkness always comes light.