

“CONVERSATIONS ON THE ROAD”

Matthew 21:1-11

April 5, 2020

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This is a day to rejoice. It's one of those days in the church year when the sanctuary is full, children are present and engaged in dramatic procession. It is a day when we wave palm branches and sing "hosanna." Even in those years where we focus on the passion of Christ, our spirits are in the mood of celebration. It's not quite Easter... but it's close.

This is a day to rejoice even though we may not feel like it today. We rejoice because even with a nearly empty sanctuary we are still gathered across the county with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have friends who are joining us who could not be physically present today, friends from various states across the country.

This is a day to rejoice for other reasons too. We rejoice because this church is determined to remain a community even in the midst of physical separation. You are calling each other during the week, sending inspirational thoughts through email, bringing groceries to those more at risk for the virus, and praying more for one another. One person shared that she felt more connected to some people because previously her fellowship was limited to Sunday morning. Many of us are getting to know each other in ways that we hadn't before. At our virtual worship team meeting last week, we considered it likely that more people joined us in worship than might have been present had we done worship in the usual way. One parent shared that her child had asked later in the day if they could do more church. So we rejoice not only because this is Palm Sunday, but also because we are learning new ways to be church.

We rejoice, but this does not mean we are happy. I have never had a Palm Sunday like this and I hope to never repeat it. I miss the procession, the palms, the crowd, the joy that comes from a congregation singing hosanna with enthusiasm. I miss the energy of this day that comes from being gathered together, an energy that can't be duplicated in one's living room.

When we thought about what live-stream worship should look like, we decided that we would not try to just duplicate our usual worship experience. We recognized that some of the things we did Sunday morning could not be replicated for the living room. That seemed especially true today.

How could I talk about a parade without that visual representation of children leading the donkey down the center aisle? How could I talk about the crowd without a crowd, the loud hosannas without the singing of the congregation? How could I talk about the palms without you sitting here and waving them?

As you can imagine, I was a little worried about preaching this story without your actual visible presence. Fortunately, there is some action in this story that happens around the

edges. There is a one-sided conversation that occurs at the beginning and a group conversation at the end. Both of these speak to sacred moments in our faith. The first invites us to participate in the work that God is doing. The second encourages us to practice, in the words of St. Augustine, “a faith seeking understanding.”

The passage opens with Jesus giving some instructions to a few of his disciples. “Go to a certain place where you’ll find a donkey and a colt and bring them to me. If anyone questions you tell them that the Lord has need of them.” We can probably safely assume that Jesus has already arranged something with the owner. We imagine the scene to take place to be completely spontaneous, but it is in fact staged. Matthew tells us that Jesus does this in order to fulfill a certain prophesy about the Messiah riding into Jerusalem in humble but celebratory fashion.

Now “staged” does not mean fake. This is not just a show. Jesus really is the Messiah and his presence means that a new order is coming. His teaching is a threat to the current religious order. He will chase out the moneychangers. He will criticize the leadership. He will change the traditional Passover meal. He will be perceived as a threat to the Romans who will place him on a cross.

Jesus will do all the heavy lifting in the week ahead, but his followers are invited to participate. Some will fetch the transportation. Others will shout hosanna. Still others will lay their coats and palm branches before him. The enthusiastic crowds are not just ignorant well-wishers swept away in the excitement of the moment. They are followers, many of whom have been traveling with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. They are likely not the same crowd who call for his death by week’s end. More likely they have gone into hiding when the movement begins to waver.

In our enthusiasm, we miss that while one group is shouting “hosanna,” another group is in turmoil. The city itself is disturbed by the parade. Instead of thinking of these followers as “fickle,” we should be more generous. Jill Duffield in last week’s Presbyterian Outlook email wrote this about them:

“In all of their complicated humanity, they did the best they could in that moment and so, too, do we. Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem and the cross knowing all too well our shortcomings and failures....

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.”

We are invited to participate in this very real drama. Just as each follower was given a role welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem, so we too are called to welcome Jesus into the turmoil of our world. Our sacred conversation begins the same way: listening for instructions from Jesus. It has been a joy to see you respond to the call of Jesus in these challenging times not with fear but with compassion.

The end of this story reminds us that the conversation never ends. We begin by responding in faith to Jesus' call, but each step of the journey encourages us reconsider what it means. The crowd wants to know who this is riding into their city. Some will say, "It is Jesus of Galilee, a prophet." And they were not wrong. The tradition has criticized this answer as incomplete, but the city responds to Jesus as it had to the prophets before him. They sought his life.

Certainly, as the week unfolds, the disciples will understand more fully who this Jesus is. This is the nature of the journey of faith. This is why we keep listening and talking. Faith seeking understanding in a sacred conversation.

We are still on the road, listening to Jesus, but also trying to understand his meaning for our day, in this crisis. It is a time of turmoil, but not without its lessons. We are learning about community, about what it means to be church, to be Jesus' followers. Some are learning about Sabbath, slowing down, giving thanks. Some are learning new ways to serve. Some are developing a deeper sense of compassion. Again Jill Duffield writes:

"I will do my best to rejoice and offer what I have to Jesus because he enters fully into the stirred-up city of Jerusalem and our trembling towns and our shaken up lives in order to take on our burdens, forgive our sins, crush evil, defeat death and bring God's unstoppable new life."

So, no parade, no "loud" hosannas, no children in procession, no waving palm branches. But still, rejoice, for we celebrate Jesus' commitment to ride into our Jerusalem. We celebrate his invitation to participate in the welcome. We rejoice that we do have words to offer the city in turmoil, words that proclaim Jesus' love to a world caught unaware. May God grant us grace and courage to act faithfully in our time, and give us the wisdom to bring healing to a broken world. Amen.

Jill Duffield Presbyterian Outlook email 3/30/2020