

April 5, 2020 – Palm/Passion Sunday

The Entry Into Jerusalem

Matthew 21:6–11

A Witness: Someone in the Crowd

I love a parade! When I was a kid it was the Fourth of July parade in Saginaw every summer – we decorated our bicycles and rode along with the fancy cars and the high school band. And, of course there was the Thanksgiving Day parade on TV. When I got a little older I watched the marches in the Civil Rights movement – a very different kind of parade – or maybe procession would be a better word. They were very meaningful to me – all those people moving together, looking strong – committed - hopeful – maybe a little afraid. Even now there are parades that change the world. Many friends, women, men, and youth, went to Washington, D. C. for the Women’s March in 2017. It was important for them, and it was important for me. And much closer to home, every Sunday morning we have our own parade, as our young acolytes, the choir, and the clergy process the cross, the word, and the light.

But the parade I am watching now is different. I’m not sure what to make of it. The crowds are there – waving palms, shouting hosanna, even throwing their cloaks on the ground in front of . . . one man . . . one man riding a little donkey. He doesn’t look very important at all, but they are shouting as if he were the King, the son of David. I heard one man say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” What in the world does that mean? I have heard that he is a prophet, and that he has healed all kinds of horrible illnesses – leprosy, paralysis, even people stricken by evil spirits. That is amazing of course, but it really doesn’t explain this crowd and their behavior – their internal strength, their commitment, their hope. And strangely, this prophet, this healer, this man looks . . . a little sad.

~ David VanderMeer

A Witness: The Owner of the Donkey

When I turned around there was someone taking my colt. I asked them what they were doing because we needed the colt for our family. They said the Lord needs it. I am still confused about why they needed my colt when there were so many other animals around. Where are they going and will my colt be returned? Lost in my own confusion and their explanation, I did not know who to trust or how to explain this to my family. They said the Lord needs it and I hope the Lord will use it for good. Laying aside judgment, God will offer us redemption;

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setting aside anger, God embraces us with love; letting go of grief, God pours living water upon us. This is the good news friends, my colt is fulfilling a purpose we never knew about and we can trust in the one who sent for the colt. Hosanna! I may not understand but I can believe that it was for my good that the colt was taken. Blessed is the One who brings us the kingdom of God! Peace be with each of you on this journey.

~ Rev. Khayla Johnson

The Cleansing of the Temple

Matthew 21:12–17

A Witness: A Child in the Crowd

I was with my family. We were standing just outside the Temple. It was a hot day and it was crowded – which made things kind of sticky. I couldn't see much because it was so crowded, but I heard loud noises... it sounded like chaos. I heard people talking about someone, a man, flipping over tables.

I moved with my family, which moved with the crowd, as we all pushed back to create space, to see what was happening. I caught a glimpse of the man in the middle of the crowd; he was saying something to the crowd. He looked a little angry.

I'd heard of this man before. This man did all sorts of miracles – he even raised a man from the dead. Can you believe that?! And here he was, healing people right before my eyes...

We had heard stories about someone coming to save us. Stories we were told since we were very little. There was a savior coming -- someone to free us! I wondered, I wonder, could it be true? I heard someone yell, "Hosanna -- to David's Son!" And then others followed, doing the same. So I joined them. "Hosanna -- to David's Son!"

Some of the temple officials yelled at us to quiet down. So the crowd quieted. But what I saw, I'll always remember. That man, standing in the middle of the crowd. And as my family turned to walk away, maybe out of defiance or some sense of hope, I whispered under my breath..."Hosanna -- to David's Son!"

~ Rev. Mark Mares

The Last Supper

Matthew 26:26–30

A Witness: The One Who Set the Table

I thought this was just another dinner for a group staying at the inn. I set the table while the food was prepared, I didn't know how important this meal was.

They came in, and I could tell they were hungry from their day. There was one among them who seemed to lead. He led them in prayer at the beginning of the meal. I watched as the others listened intently to each word.

They enjoyed their meal and the company they shared, deep in conversation with each other. But I could tell the one who led them- Jesus, I think his name was – had something on his mind. I had heard his name before. I had heard the stories. Stories of healing, kindness to the unclean, putting the poor first... who was this person that does those things?

The one named Jesus sat quietly for a minute. One by one, each of his followers fell silent as well, watching him with fixed eyes. He took a piece of the flat bread that I had just brought to them. Freshly baked, cooled, and crisp. And I remember exactly what he told them. He held it out for all of them to see and hear him. “Take this bread and eat it. This bread is my body.” He passed the basket of flat bread around the table to each of his followers. Then Jesus picked up his cup and filled it with wine from the pitcher at the table. He gave thanks to his God- the God that he and his followers said is the one true God... and I knew in my heart, at that moment, that it is true. He passed the cup around to them and said, “Drink this cup, all of you. This cup is my blood, God’s new covenant poured out for all people for the forgiveness of sin. I promise that I will not drink from this cup again until the new day when I drink it with you in Paradise.”

I had tears in my eyes, but I didn’t know why... God’s new covenant? Poured out for all people... for the forgiveness of sin?

To forgive all my sins... truly showing me love. The stories were true. He is true. He is truly the son of God.

I thought it was just another dinner. I didn’t know how important this meal was...

~Beca Torres-Davenport

The Denial in the Courtyard

Matthew 26:31–35, 69–75

A Witness: A Bystander

I see a man crying in the courtyard. Surely he was with this Jesus of Nazareth, as the servant girls said, for he spoke with a foreign accent.

Does he weep out of shame for denying and deserting his teacher? Or does he weep for the fate of his teacher, a fate he cannot stop? I wonder: Who is this Jesus?

Some say this Jesus is the Messiah. Some call him the Son of David, the next in line to be our one true king. Surely there must be something special about him for people like this man to weep over him.

Yet the priests have condemned Jesus to death for his blasphemy. I know I would be afraid to die. But if Jesus is who he says he is, then why doesn't he save himself?

And if Jesus can't save himself, then I think I too would deny him, lest my fate be sealed with his. What an impossible choice for this crying man to make: To admit he knew Jesus would mean his fate would be sealed with his teacher, to the point of punishment and probable death. Yet to deny knowing Jesus, he now escapes with his life.

Although what good is a man's life if he has denied what he believes, and denies his true self?

What if this Jesus is the promised one we have been waiting for? What if this man is weeping not for himself, but for us... because it is we who are making a mistake, and not he? If so, we are the ones to be pitied most of all.

Lord, forgive this man. Forgive all of us. For we are afraid, and we know not what we do.

~ Rev. Evans McGowan

The Garden of Gethsemane

Matthew 26:36–46

A Witness: The Gardener

I was there when that young rabbi came to my garden. I was putting away my tools and preparing to go home, but I let him be. He seemed so sad...so scared. It wasn't my business. I finished up my tasks and began to leave when suddenly I heard a loud cry of anguish. I turned and saw the young rabbi on his knees, sobbing and alone, lifting his hands to the heavens, praying more earnestly than I've ever seen a person pray. I couldn't tear my eyes from him. After some time, he gathered himself and walked to where those who had come with him were sleeping under a tree. He started shouting angrily, though I couldn't make out his words, and they started awake. He went away to pray again, and almost as soon as he left them, they fell back to sleep. He was all alone. There was no one to comfort him, to pray with him, so I did. I got on my knees right where I was and I prayed to God: "Lord, comfort your suffering servant. Be with him in his agony and strengthen him for the journey ahead. Encourage those who follow him to keep watch for any opportunity to serve you. Help us all remember the poor, the sick, and the dying. Fill our hearts with compassion for those the world casts into the ditch. I never met your servant, but I heard that he stands for justice and peace. Praise to you, O God, for sending him to be with us, for sending him to teach us, for sending him to show us how to love. We need him so desperately right now. Save us, O God! Our futures are so uncertain, and it's so easy to lose hope. The only other words I have are the words I once heard that young rabbi pray during a sermon on a mountain: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.'" "

~Rev. Andrew Frazier

The Charge and Benediction

We have heard again the story of how the last week of his life began. We've tried to see him through the eyes of those who were there: those who saw him, and followed him into the hopes and fears and gathering shadows of those days. Now – we are *here*.

And we gird ourselves to follow where that week leads. He asked us to stay awake with him, to pray with him, and to follow him to love. To courage. To sacrifice and anguish. And then – to life.

To life!

So – our service now begins. Let us go forth into this next week of our lives – remembering that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Let us go, resolved, as always,
to let love be genuine;
to hold fast to what is good;
to be ardent in spirit;
to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer;
to live in harmony with one another and, insofar as possible, to live peaceably with all.

For the peace of God, which passes all our understanding, is stirring among us even now, even in this particular world in this particular week.

May it keep your hearts and minds in the steadfast love of God, keep them in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, keep them in the enlivening love of the Holy Spirit –
this day, this night, tomorrow,
and even forevermore. Amen.

~Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding