

Palm Sunday Homily
Matthew 21:1-11
Hyattstown Christian Church
Worshiping by ZOOM
April 5, 2020

Dear sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ:

On Palm Sunday of the year 2020, we are meeting in a manner that may not be required again on any Palm Sunday in our lifetimes. By the Grace of God, we shall hope not. By the Grace of God, we are able to be together through technology, while continuing to abide by the restrictions of social distancing that the coronavirus has imposed. As a friend has pointed out, our faith is our immunity.

This week, as I have revisited the Matthew text that we listened to this morning, I have noted differences and similarities in the familiar story relative to our current experience.

Verse 8 of Chapter 21 says that there was “a very large crowd” greeting Jesus in Jerusalem— imagine probably shoulder to shoulder. Today, we must avoid being in a crowd of almost any size, and even then six feet apart.

Verse 10 says that “the whole city was in turmoil”. Today, many American cities are in turmoil.

And the text says that when Jesus was riding in, some people were asking “Who is this?” Today, assaulted as we are by a pandemic riding across national borders, people are asking “What is this?”

Consider differences and similarities in the story relevant to our current experience.

I have also noted that the story describes a balance between Love and Fear, and that is not unlike our current experience. The village of Bethpage, where Jesus and the disciples had paused with other friends, is only two miles outside of Jerusalem. Despite the disciples’ efforts to dissuade him,

Jesus was moving forthrightly to what he knew and they knew was his certain death. The fear of the disciples, and the fear that was driving the resentful civil and religious authorities against Jesus, is balanced by the unconditional love of Jesus for the God who was guiding him, for the friends who were pleading with him, for the enemies who had indicted him, and—by the way—for us.

In our current experience, let's be honest, fear is a very real, driving force. I see it on the faces of people who back away from me if they believe I am violating the commandment to maintain a six foot gap between us. I hear it behind the confusing statements of some civil authorities and contradictory actions of some religious authorities. I read it in the report about a Palestinian university summarily shut down by Israeli officials. Today, Fear is a very real, driving force.

But it is balanced by Love that is as much a real, driving force: The love of a mother and son reunited after 49 days apart while she reported for her network from inside China. The love of nurses who accompany a COVID-19 patient through his final breaths when his family cannot be with him. The love of a pre-school neighbor who prepares a homemade lesson for me to finally learn my numbers. Today, thankfully, Love is a very real, driving force.

The story of Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem for a fateful Passover is a description of a balance between Love and Fear. By circumstance, our Palm Sunday, our Holy Week of 2020, arrives as a balance between Love and Fear.

There is another lesson to note from this morning's familiar New Testament text: By choice, Jesus embodies humility as he arrives in Jerusalem. The gospel writer Matthew is very clear about that. Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah, but with intentionality. Five hundred years earlier, Zechariah predicts that a King will indeed come to save the Jews, but describes the savior as "triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a colt." Matthew quotes Zechariah, to verify Jesus's legitimacy, but purposely deletes the "triumphant and victorious" characterization. Matthew stresses the humility of

this arriving King, which Jesus himself certifies by choosing to mount a donkey, the despised livestock of his culture. A King of triumph and victory would be mounted on a horse, an impressive, regal steed of prevailing authority. Jesus's prevailing authority—then and now—is his humility.

To counter the Fear, Jesus embodies Love. To counter Triumphalism, Jesus embodies Humility.

Let's not ignore that in verse 8, Matthew says "the disciples went and did what Jesus had told them to do." Being disciples as we are, in the lineage of our Galilean ancestors, we might also go and do what Jesus has told us, and shown us, to do:

Counter Fear, with Love. Counter Triumphalism, with Humility.

Our faith is our immunity.