

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 April 14, 2019 (Palm/Passion Sunday)  
 Luke 22:14 –23:56  
 Into Jerusalem

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

What comes to mind when you think of the word “protester”? Of course, there are many types of protestors: there are antiwar protesters, protesters for common sense gun legislation and gun rights protesters; protesters for liberal causes and conservative causes and everything in between. Sometimes, they clash with each other. Protests tend to make us nervous because they carry with them an inherent risk of instability.

Outside the United States, there are even more types of protesters: those who rally in favor of governments and those who seek to overthrow them.

Today, I ask you to set your feet in the dust of Jerusalem and look across the sunny stone streets. Hear the cries of a different kind of protest in an occupied land: the people are waving branches and spreading their coats along the road. The crowd is pressing in, clamoring to see the one they've heard about: Jesus of Nazareth. They even dare to proclaim him “king.”

Hear the talk around you: “I heard he can make lepers clean,” says one man to another. Nearby, a woman says, “I heard that his birth was announced by angels.” “That can't be,” comes the reply of another woman. “Who is he, anyway? Moses himself?”

“Well,” comes another voice, “I have some relatives in the north. They say that there was this widow whose son had died, and Jesus of Nazareth brought him back from the dead at the funeral. My relatives say they saw it for themselves.” Everyone's eyes go wide.

Just then, there's a commotion in the midst of the crowd. Jesus is coming closer. He's riding... a colt? The people lay their coats on the road before him as they welcome him into the Holy City. They truly give him a royal welcome. They chant “Hosanna” together.

We should remember: Israel was not a free country. It was a country that was occupied by a foreign empire and bitter adversary. People did not have the right to peaceably assemble, much less assemble to declare a teacher to be a king over and above the mighty empire. There is not

supposed to be any ruler of Israel except Rome's emperor. And yet, here we are, gathering, chanting, cheering.

While we may think little of it today because we're so familiar with the story, giving a royal welcome to a religious teacher and shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" was a highly subversive act at the time. Rome ruled with an iron fist, and they took subversive action seriously. Those gathered on this first Palm Sunday were risking their lives, and they knew it.

But they still clamored forward to see, to shout, to protest the oppression and celebrate the one they thought might free them. Today, we stand with them. Today, we declare that we, too, have only one ruler, and that there is no person, economic philosophy, or political party that is above Christ. Only Jesus gets the royal welcome.

Welcome to Holy Week, friends. It begins with shouting.

We know that later in the week this royal welcome will not last. We humans are fragile creatures, and we often get it right before messing it all up again. Our momentary courage often precedes our running away. This is what will happen to Jesus. The crowd which today shouts, "Hosanna!" will on Friday shout, "Crucify him!" They will come to fully understand the danger that Jesus poses to their stability. They will see that he is not a military leader. And they will sacrifice him for continued peace with Rome.

Today begins Holy Week. Today, we again set our feet on the road to the Last Supper, to the garden to pray, to the cross, and to the tomb. And while we already know the ending, let's pretend for a moment that we don't. The disciples didn't. When Jesus died on Friday, that was supposed to be the end. If death is not real, then Easter is no miracle.

So, plant your feet in the dust of Jerusalem this day. Feel the palm branch in your hand and remember the teacher who rode through the subversive protest on a colt.

This Holy Week story is life. This story is our lives. Joy. Love. Fear. Grief. Betrayal. Pain. Even the ordinary: eating, drinking, washing. This place, friends, is where we learn both joy and grief, celebration and pain: in church. During Holy Week. Here, we see our ordinary lives echoed in the life and love of Jesus Christ, the Eternal. We see our imperfect lives reflected in the perfect and saving love of Christ. And in it, may you, too, find some seed of hope.

This story is our story. And every year, the Church gathers to tell it again, beginning on those dusty Jerusalem streets with the crowd that dared

to gather to celebrate the teacher that many had only heard about. Today, the story begins again.

We tell this story of love, death, and resurrection, just as every year around this time the Jewish people gather in their homes for the Passover, to tell the story of God's people journeying from slavery into freedom. Because the God of Israel saves. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, writing of the Passover, says, "Every Israelite must tell the story again, not only for what is remembered, but also for what is experienced directly, immediately, personally, at first hand."

Friends, we are invited to gather on Jerusalem's streets and shout Hosanna and tell this story together again. May our lives reflect the protest that we have held here today: that despite what the world may tell us, our highest loyalty is to Christ alone, the one who died and lives again, the one who binds us to people of all races, nationalities, and affiliations. Christ, the one who joins us together with people we love and with people we'd rather not associate with.

We gather with the Church all around the world to tell the story, because every Christian must tell it again, not only for what is remembered, but for what is experienced.

We tell it again just as our ancestors in the faith have. We tell it again as the Church did last year. We tell it again as the Church will next year. Because this story is not just Jesus' story. It is our story. We tell it again not only for what is remembered, but also for what we have experienced of this saving God in our own flesh.

And so, with our hands and our feet, with our sight and our senses, with our singing and our prayers, let us walk through Holy Week again.

We tell it again because it is our story, and we tell it again to proclaim it to the world. We tell it again because this week, in this time, we keep the rumor alive that there is a God in Heaven, and that despite the pain that we see every day, that God is a God of Love and Hope, and a God who cries with, loves, and cares for every person. Until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at the Heavenly Banquet. The story of Holy Week, this story, Jesus' story, is our story. It is the story of how love and grace became flesh and defeated death and changed everything. It is the story of every time you have experienced grace when you thought your world had ended. It is the story of how very loved we are.

Ann Weems has written a poem – Holy Week – listen to her words:  
Holy is the week...Holy, consecrated, belonging to God....

We move from hosannas to horror

With the predictable ease  
 Of those who know not what they do.  
 Our hosannas sung,  
 Our palms waved,  
 Let us go with passion into this week.  
 It is a time to curse fig trees that do not yield fruit.  
 It is a time to cleanse our temples of any blasphemy.  
 It is a time to greet Jesus as the Lord's Anointed One,  
 To lavishly break our alabaster  
 And pour perfume out for him  
 Without counting the cost.

It is a time for preparation...  
 The time to give thanks and break bread is upon us.  
 The time to give thanks and drink of the cup is imminent.  
 Eat. Drink. Remember.  
 On this night of nights, each one must ask,  
 As we dip our bread in the wine,  
 Is it I?  
 And on that darkest of days, each of us must stand  
 Beneath the tree  
 And watch the dying  
 If we are to be there  
 When the stone is rolled away.

The only road to Easter morning  
 Is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday  
 Only then will the alleluias be sung  
 Only then will the dancing begin.

Let us travel that road together – let us live in the hope this week brings.

And now, let us pray:

God, on this day of hosannas and of horror, help me remember that  
 you are large enough to contain my hope, my joy, my fear, my despair —  
 with room enough for the passion of every fellow creature and all creation.  
 Lead me through this Holy Week with “Hosanna” on my lips: “Save us,  
 Living Word of God!” Amen.

“Holy Week” by Ann Weems – from Kneeling in Jerusalem, 1992