

“Palms to Passion”

March 28, 2021 Palm Sunday
Mark 11:1-11

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I know what lies ahead and I don't want to go there. It starts with a parade but ends with passion — not the love kind, the suffering kind. This is the week that Jesus will be betrayed by a close friend, abandoned by his most faithful followers, interrogated, humiliated and abused by his own religious community and tortured by the state. It's the week he will feel cut off, even abandoned by God before he gives up his spirit and dies a young man, innocent of any wrong doing.

This story, this history is something we remember each year as Christians because it is the central story of our faith. But this year I don't feel like remembering. I feel like we've had enough suffering. I'd like to skip over this week and go directly to Easter.

I'd also like to skip over the season of mud and the mess. There is so, so much litter at the sides of the roads and a ridiculous amount of dog poo in my backyard and along the paths. I don't like early spring. Why can't we go directly from cold winter to real spring — to pretty green grass, daffodils and tulips, lots of sunshine?

I don't need to remind you what a challenging year this has been. We are all weary of the pandemic. We were weary of the pandemic last summer and sick of it by November, and so, so done with it by January. This pandemic is just like those party guests who don't seem to know when it's time to leave... (back in the before times when you could have a party!) Even though we put the banner up... (you know you're old when you think to yourself "Where can I get a banner like that?")



Even though we put the banner up, the Covid guest, more like the Covid party crasher, is showing no signs of getting their shoes and coat on and heading to the door.

Amanda Gorman started her now famous poem “The Hill We Climb” with this line: “*When day comes we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade?*”

We are weary of the shade, not eager to enter into the darkness of Holy Week.

I want you to imagine what it must have been like for Jesus as they approached Jerusalem. He knew what lay ahead. He understood the significance of this arrival. His disciples did not, even though he tried to prepare them and will, in the next few chapters of the book of Mark, try to help them to understand.

Actually, a good exercise this week would be to read those 5 chapters in the book of Mark from Mark 11 to 16 to get a sense of the span. About a third of each of the Gospel books (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are devoted to this one week in Jesus' life.

For the disciples and follows of Jesus the entry into Jerusalem is a high—it's a time of celebration. What are they celebrating? They see Jesus as the Messiah — the one who will save them. Salvation is what they expect. And of course, it's ironic because salvation is exactly the purpose, but not the way they expect it. They were thinking of being saved from their Roman oppressors, so they enter the week with cheers and excitement. Jesus on the other hand is noticeably quieter. There's no megaphone on this ride into Jerusalem, just some brief instructions.

I wonder what the scene would have looked like for the disciples and the followers of Jesus on that Sunday if they had known what was coming over the next several days. There wouldn't have been palm branches and cheering, I'm sure. But would they have walked into the city at all? I doubt that too many would.

We humans don't like pain and suffering. We will do a lot to separate and numb ourselves to the pain. Almost every person with a serious addiction is numbing themselves from past pain and trauma. Who can blame them? The problem with addictions — and there are lots of problems with addictions — is *what seems like freedom quickly becomes a prison and what seems like nirvana quickly becomes hell in body, mind and spirit.* But one of the interesting things is that studies have found that when we use drugs to numb the pain – it does do that for a brief time, but it also numbs the joy. It numbs other emotions that we enjoy and need.

I can think of three good reasons to enter into the suffering of this week and remember the pain. The first is what I just described – *as we open ourselves to feeling that pain, we open ourselves to truly feeling the joy.*

The second is that there is something about following Jesus into his suffering that opens the door for Jesus to come into our places of pain and to bring healing. His suffering brings awareness of our suffering and

reminds us that we are not alone in that pain. This awareness can lead to healing if we are open to it.

The third is that it also allows us to be open to the pain of others. The world needs us not to turn away from the pain of others, but to walk with them; to deeply listen to them and at times to fight for them to bring justice. When we avoid our own pain, we can't bring life and healing to others. That is our role as Christians — to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. These are not soft, manicured hands. These are the rough hands of a carpenter, the hands that dig into mud to bring sight to the blind. These are hands that have holes from the nails that held him to the cross. These are hands that bear the scars of pain.

All through Lent we studied the book by Rich Villodas *"The Deeply Formed Life"*. Villodas' point was that we need to bring our whole selves to our faith in a deep way. Our faith needs to affect all of our life, not just our schedule on Sunday morning or whenever we tune in to the service on YouTube.

How many of you remember doing the Hokey Pokey? How does it start? *"You put your right hand in, you put your right hand out, you put your right hand in and you shake it all about. You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself about, that's what it's all about!"*

How does it end? You're lucky this church has pews otherwise I'd have been seriously tempted to get you to stand up so that we could all look foolish together. *"You put your whole self in, you put your whole self out, you put your whole self in and you shake it all about. You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself about — That's what it's all about!"*

Friends, that's what it's all about.

As we stand on the edge of Holy Week, we have a choice to just put an arm in and quickly take it out or to put our whole selves in. What will it take for you to choose to follow? I hope it's not 100% certainty. Relationships are always a matter of faith. Even when you decide to marry someone there is never 100% certainty, but there is enough for you to say "I'm going to commit, for better and for worse".

Here's the thing — God is up to something incredible through this week. This isn't pain for the fun of it. This is suffering that will bring redemption. It is deeper than we can begin to imagine, but in the same way that we trust that the mud of early spring will bring the beauty and life of late spring, we can trust that his walk to the cross will end in life. Those who choose to follow from the palms and into the passion, into the suffering, will by the grace of God experience the incredible joy, the healing, and the new life that the Risen Christ brings at Easter.

Thanks be to God. Amen.