

Palm Sunday is more than just a festive celebration—it's a powerful reminder of moral courage and love in action. On the one hand it reminds us of Jesus's unwavering courage as he enters Jerusalem, knowing it will lead to his crucifixion. On the other, it's also a day that reveals the courage of humanity, as ordinary people step up not only to support what's right but to celebrate it, even when it's risky. Whether through acts of solidarity, like the crowd laying down their palms for Jesus, or moments of personal bravery in our day, courage can transform individuals and communities. Jesus's journey into Jerusalem embodies this profound courage—one that calls us to live boldly, stand with the marginalized, and act with compassion in the footsteps of our God. This Palm Sunday, we are reminded that our courage, however small, matters in a world in need of love and justice.

St Luke 19:28–4, 45-47 - NRSVUE

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” As he came near the city he wept over it. Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.” Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

I've always loved Palm Sunday. As a child living in Ghana in West Africa, I remember we would literally get the palms straight from the trees down by the beach. And it was such a celebration, palms waving, drums beating! Of course as a child I didn't give a lot of thought to what we were celebrating, other than the fact that Easter was only a week away, and Lent would FINALLY be over and I could start having dessert again! But what Palm Sunday hides beneath the celebration, the real joy, the shouts, and the waving palms is the greatest true story of steadfast love, solidarity and moral courage that the world has ever seen. Moral courage is risky; it's potentially costly — by the end of the week it costs Jesus his life — but it has the power to transform not only us, but also the world.

In our regular life every once in a while we get a glimpse of it, and certainly our stories and movies are full of paler examples of moral courage, with people real and fictional whose examples we'd like to live up to. For instance, do you remember the movie *Napoleon Dynamite*?? It came out in the early 2000's. I work part-time in a high school, so stories of courage and unlikely heroes in that setting really resonate with me.

Napoleon Dynamite — that's his name — is the quintessential bullied teenager. He's socially inept, goofy looking, and a complete social pariah in his school. He's made fun of, he's thrown into lockers by the bullies, and he's left to play tetherball by himself at break time. Fortunately, eventually, he makes two friends, both also social pariahs, a girl called Deb who's a math nerd and who Napoleon obviously has a crush on (I say obviously because he does nothing but throw really awkward insults her way!) and Pedro, a recent immigrant from Mexico. Together the three sit at the outcasts' table at lunch and endure the bullying of the high school elite.

But here's the thing. Pedro, Napoleon's new friend, has courage and he has hope. He doesn't seem to quite realize that he's at the bottom of the school pecking order. Despite the fact that he's a despised immigrant and the subject of racist taunts, he decides to run for student council president after seeing a poster on the wall. He believes he can make the school better. He doesn't know that such positions are normally reserved for the 'popular' kids. And this somehow brings out Napoleon's courage. He immediately engages in supporting his friend and his campaign, including having T-shirts printed that say "Vote for Pedro". Nobody of course wears one other than Napoleon and Pedro and Deb, but that doesn't discourage Napoleon in the least.

On the final day of campaigning the candidates are invited to give a speech in the auditorium. First to go is the social queen of the school, the leggy and blond captain of the cheerleading squad — a bully to all lesser mortals — who is also the girlfriend of the captain of the football team who is Napoleon's nemesis. She gets up on the stage in her little cheerleading outfit, gives her speech, and then the squad does their dance with pompoms flying and music blaring. They are the coolest kids ever. It doesn't look like Pedro has a chance. His speech is short, and people don't really seem interested. The microphone echoes with feedback as he finishes his speech to no applause. He doesn't have cheerleaders in snazzy outfits, and he walks off the stage a lonely figure.

Who is going to dance for him? Well, I'll tell you who. *Napoleon Dynamite*, as it turns out, likes to dance. (I think this story came to me because of Pastor Kim's wonderful message from last week where she reminded us to keep dancing through the hard times, even if it's in the dark.) So Pedro's best friend Napoleon, that total outcast, gets the tech crew to put in his mixed tape and he gives the single worst, most embarrassing, and most memorable solo dance performance that I think has ever occurred in the history of the world. I strongly encourage you to google it.

It's so bad, and yet... he's clearly so courageous and caring to perform it, that it transforms the auditorium full of teenagers who are watching. They go from jeering to cheering! You see, Napoleon has what they want, what we all want — the courage to act with integrity. The courage to cheer for the marginalized and oppressed. The courage to act with compassion. The courage to try to change

everything. And it does change everything. Pedro is voted in, not only because of his own courage but because of that of his friend.

Napoleon Dynamite is a comedy of course, but it does show us that even though our courage may be a pale imitation of Jesus's courage, it matters deeply. For all of us, our courage matters. Your courage to come here and be in community today, your courage to share your gifts with the church, your courage to smile at a stranger or greet someone even if you yourself are struggling, your courage to support your friends and hold them when life challenges them, your courage to share your talents and your courage to work for causes of justice and peace — how grateful we are for all of that. Oh, how that transforms the world! And when you do these things, you are living out the courage of Jesus during Holy Week. Every week, always.

The celebrations of Palm Sunday are a human reaction to the almost incomprehensible courage and love on the part of our God, a willingness on God's part to be present and part of our struggles in the most extreme act of solidarity which will, within the week, lead both to Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection on the third day. On Palm Sunday we celebrate the fact that God is here for humanity, and we also celebrate the fact that sometimes humans get it right, and humanity also shows up for God.

Let's begin by looking at the courage exhibited by Jesus. Jesus' first act of courage before entering Jerusalem is to root himself in humility. He does not clothe himself in the rich robes of the powerful and ride in on a high horse protected by the military. There is no secret service. Instead, he allows himself to be vulnerable and touchable. He asks for a donkey to ride on for the 3 km from Bethany to Jerusalem, reminding us of his roots and perhaps of his mother, who rode a donkey into Bethlehem, heavy with the promise of the birth of Jesus that was to come. On Palm Sunday as he progresses towards Jerusalem, Jesus reminds us not just of who he is as God, but also of who he is as a man — an outcast member of an oppressed community, someone born far from home, in a simple cave. He reminds the people around him that he is theirs, and full of love and compassion and joy for them.

But having chosen vulnerability, and having chosen the side of the oppressed, Jesus has also chosen risk. He knows the dangers of entering Jerusalem. As he prepares to enter that seat of power — and by that I mean ALL human power in this time and place, including political, military and religious — he knows he will be walking eventually to his death. You see Jesus had said some pretty critical things:

- He'd sent demons into pigs — a taboo food for Jews — and the demons had been named "Legion," a clear insult to the Romans. Then he'd sent the pigs over the side of a cliff into a lake.
- He'd broken the religious purity laws, by feeding and healing people on the Sabbath, and he'd spent his time with social outcasts, the sick, and the 'sinners'.
- He was advocating and living out a new way of being in community, where all cared for each other, where all shared what they had. In Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, social value no longer had any connection to how much money you had, what gender you were, what you did for a living, or how healthy you were. It didn't even matter where you came from. All that mattered was that you were human.

Jesus' call to love our neighbour was radical. As far as the authorities were concerned, it upset everything. And in fact, that is Jesus' point. His first act when he enters Jerusalem is to weep for it, for all it has become. His second act is to overturn the tables of the vendors in the temple. That was both a concrete and a symbolic action.

People were required to offer a burnt offering — in other words essentially pay a temple tax through buying animals at the temple — at least three times a year. The meat from the burnt offerings would go to the priests, as would a portion of the proceeds. And the Romans would also get their cut. Yet the people were so poor, and already subjected to an unbearable and corrupt tax system by the Roman rulers, that this became just one more tax. Think *tariffs* if you will. It was a long way from the communal acts of worship of Moses' day which happened out in the world as the people travelled.

On Good Friday of course, Jesus would become the ultimate sacrifice, and it would be his blood that would run from the floggings, the crown of thorns, and the cross, as an expression of deep love and solidarity with each of us. No other blood sacrifice would be needed after that, no payment of unfair tribute, no enabling of Empire at the cost of the lives of the poor.

On Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday, Jesus begins to take his first steps toward the cross with tremendous courage. We know that by Thursday, as he waits to be arrested in the Garden, he will pray for the Father's cup to be passed from him. But he will persevere and accept the Will of God. Courage only exists when there is fear. Jesus, though fully divine, was also fully human. So if you've ever been afraid, know that your God gets you.

Many of you are probably familiar with the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis, of which the first book is "*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*". Well in the third or fourth book called "*The Voyage of the Dawntrader*", the ship they are in is caught at one point in a terrible nightmarish darkness from which there seems to be no escape. Just as hope seems to disappear, a beautiful bird full of light appears and leads them out of the darkness back to the light. As it flies around the ship, it quietly whispers to Lucy, "*Courage, Dear Heart.*" This is the Holy Spirit, the voice of God, the light in the darkness that will always be there to hold us when we need the courage to go on. And nowhere is the courage given to us by God more obvious than on Palm Sunday.

I want to take you back to that first Palm Sunday morning. Imagine you are part of the crowd. Imagine the heat of the day building, the sensation and sound of a breeze through the palm trees, the people moving about their business. And then word begins to spread. Jesus is coming! Jesus, the preacher who has enthralled his disciples with this idea that all are loved by God, that no more is asked of us but to love our God and each other in response. The Son of this God is coming! He's going to go into the heart of the city, through the gates. He's going to the temple and Herod's palace. He's going to where the governor Pontius Pilate rules. He's coming like a light in the darkness.

On the day that Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, just as his mother entered Bethlehem, the people come, like the angels and shepherds and wise men at his birth, because who can stay away when we know God is near? But the Palm Sunday procession isn't just an act of worship. When Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem the people also engage in an act of solidarity, of love of God — and a

courageous act of profound resistance to the Roman Empire and to the religious and military elite of the day.

Please understand that at any time, any of Jesus' disciples could have been taken by the soldiers, whipped, incarcerated, and killed, as Jesus will be. So to join a procession led by Jesus, to yell *Hosanna!* and to throw your cloak on the ground before him, was an incredibly courageous act of solidarity with God, and with all the outcast people whom Jesus had named as his.

Sure, we'll find by the end of the week that only a few have the courage to stay right to the crucifixion, and to visit the tomb on the morning of the resurrection. The crowds will yell "*Crucify him!*" — maybe even some of those who waved palms when he entered the city. Fortunately God is forgiving. Thank God, God is forgiving. Courage is something we reach for over and over again. It's not a one-and-done kind of thing. It's a grace of the Holy Spirit that we reach for, helping us to face the hard times with dignity, and to hold each other up when one of us begins to fall.

We admire the courageous, don't we? We dream of having courage, even though it often fails us. Or at least it often fails me. We thrill to it when we hear of courage because we know the story of someone's courage is also the story of someone responding to the call of God.

Remember Terry Fox? Of course you do. The young man who decided that despite his cancer diagnosis and the loss of a leg that he would run across Canada. Terry began attending a Christian Church just before he started his Marathon of Hope.

He didn't make it all the way across Canada of course, and he was disappointed about that. But it didn't matter really because it wasn't the destination that mattered, it was the journey. It was the fact that he had the courage to live his life *his way*, right up to the end, for others. And oh, how people came out to cheer, just like on Palm Sunday! To this day, we continue to run because of Terry. We continue to raise money for cancer treatment. We continue to remember what courage looks like. Courage is contagious.

Recently a number of us have been reading Archbishop Marianne Budde's book "*How to Learn to be Brave*". She's the one who chastised Donald Trump at his inaugural prayer service! She called him to kindness and to mercy. Doesn't sound like a challenging message, does it? But it was to Donald Trump. It would have been to Herod too, or Pontius Pilate. Sometimes it is for all of us, but the more worldly power a person has, the harder that message is to hear. The more it's a threat. You have to hear a call to mercy across the noise of greed, of self-cent redness, of extraordinary wealth and privilege, and that can make it very hard to hear.

Marianne Budde's message didn't break through to Donald Trump, sadly, and she has faced an incredible amount of backlash for standing up to him. But that hasn't stopped her, although it's hard. It has also inspired many to keep trying. This is the thing — courage is infectious.

Last week, Pastor Kim spoke to us about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who constantly called out the horror of Naziism, and who eventually was executed. We have not forgotten him either because courage is infectious. If we listen to courageous people, if we act with courage even when we're afraid, we too become courageous. The people ran out to support Jesus because his courage

was irresistible, because one or two people went first and inspired others to follow until there was a crowd standing up to the Romans! And we haven't forgotten that. That's why we wave palms or coats today.

We are called always into a courageous relationship with God. Christ's actions in the world have not ended. The empire of Rome is long gone, but there are other empires that threaten our world, both small and remote and large and present. And there are other things that tax our courage. There is our own suffering and loss, the grief and fears that we carry. The question that hovers over every mind, — where will life take us, and where will death find us? But that is the beauty of this Holy Week. It ends at an empty tomb, the first of many, and a reminder that love is for eternity.

Every day we humans are being called again by God, just as we were on Palm Sunday, to come out, to be brave, to support each other, and to transform the world.

Our voices matter to the forgotten and the marginalized, in so many places. Like here in Brockville where homelessness and hunger grow and grow and yet people fight back. In Sudan and Eastern Uganda where rogue paramilitaries run amok and still people stand for law and order. In Ukraine, where peace still seems a distant dream, and still people reach for it. In Palestine where genocide continues and still people call for justice. And of course here in North America, we need to be ever vigilant that we also do not fall into the trap of empire or fascism or selfishness. There was nothing in the water in Germany that turned them towards Naziism, nothing in the air. It was very simply an unwillingness on the part of good people to do anything when evil began to grow. Or to put it another way, it was a lack of courage.

The United Church of Canada *New Creed* starts with the words "We are not alone. We live in God's world." It's true, we *are* not alone. God is calling to us even now. Whispering "Courage, dear hearts". Come out. Speak up. Wave your palms and believe in yourself. Be together and believe in your community, this community. Continue to share your gifts and speak your words even when you are afraid. Make music if you can, dance even if you can't. Believe your life has worth, that your courage will be infectious, and that your God is with you, whatever battles you face.

Sometimes, when times are really tough, it takes an act of courage just to dance in the dark. But if we do that long enough, we will, eventually, all of us, dance together in the light.

Amen.