

“A City in Turmoil”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Palm Sunday – April 5, 2020

Matthew 21: 1-11

Three-and-a-half weeks. That’s how long it’s been since we’ve entered this tumultuous time. Public health officials and elected leaders limiting our gathering in groups together, eventually being told we need to stay at home unless for essential trips. Restaurants forced to only offer carry out or delivery, but they are realizing that this is not sustainable long-term. Businesses forced to alter how they conduct their work, or many just having to close because there’s no way to remain viable. Hundreds of thousands of people in our state filing for unemployment in the last two weeks. The turmoil is everywhere.

This hit a new level for many of us on Thursday, when the governor announced that schools would not reopen this year. For high school seniors, there won’t be the usual celebrations that everyone else has enjoyed, or if there are, they will look very, very different. For other students, there is anxiety about how to learn necessary material to prepare for the next year. For teachers, there is stress and worry about how to best educate their students in a manner that has been thrust upon them with little warning. For families and parents, there is angst and uncertainty about how to care for children at home, while seeking to provide life’s necessities, and the emotional strain is enormous. The turmoil is everywhere.

And for any who do not accept this is real, that the media is overplaying the strain on our medical system – you should sit at our dining room table each night for dinner. My wife, Debbie, is a chaplain at IU West Hospital. That hospital was the first in the IU Health System to experience the surge of coronavirus patients. To protect privacy, I will not share any numbers with you. What I will say is that this is real, this is serious, and it is taking a toll on our health care providers. In whatever way we can, we need to show our love and support to them, and in our practicing of physical distancing help reduce the strain on our health care system. The turmoil is everywhere.

Much like our world is in turmoil, the city of Jerusalem was in turmoil when Jesus of Nazareth entered it over 2,000 years ago. As we experience a truly unnerving time in our lives today, how are we called to mark this holy day as we begin Holy Week as the people of God? How does Palm Sunday influence or deepen our faith in the one who comes in the name of the Lord? How might this Palm Sunday be different than so many others, yet prepare us as always for the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord?

To begin with, we can take a closer look at exactly what is going on in Matthew's account of this day, and consider how that deepens our understanding and meaning of Jesus' entry. There were thousands more people in Jerusalem that day than there ordinarily would be. One estimate I read indicated that while Jerusalem would normally have had about 40,000 residents, during the week of Passover, the total number of people present could have been as many as 200,000 (John Rollefson, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 155). For many Jews, Jerusalem was the focal point of a year-long pilgrimage to celebrate this ancient feast. So, there was already an air of excitement due to this annual religious ritual.

That was then heightened by the fact that several in the crowd had heard of this Jesus of Nazareth, had heard of his ministry throughout Judea and Galilee, and wondered if he was the one. Was he the one promised by God to save Israel and reign over the people as a divine king? Was he the one who would destroy Israel's enemies in battle and establish a new kingdom like that of David? Was Jesus the one who was the Messiah, the King of Kings?

For the Gospel writer Matthew, it is crucial to understand how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. Throughout his gospel, Matthew quotes the prophets to prove to his church that Jesus is the Messiah in the line of David. In his recounting of Palm Sunday, Matthew quotes both Isaiah and Zechariah in verse 5, and he's so concerned with this day being exactly how the prophets foretold it, that it appears Jesus is riding two animals into Jerusalem! In the translation we read from this morning, it says that the disciples "brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them" (21:7). This is directly from the quotation in verse five, where we read that the king will come to the people "mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." As we discussed in our Bible Study on Tuesday, what matters is not so much the literalness of the translation, but the theological importance that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise through the prophets.

Throughout the gospels, though, we witness the gap between the people's expectation of who the Messiah was to be, and Jesus' own understanding of his role as the King of Kings. The people have come to their understanding that the Messiah is to be this great warrior king who will overthrow all the earthly powers that have enslaved the Jews for so long. Jesus has a much different interpretation of his role as the Messiah, and it is that difference of understanding which leads to his suffering and death.

Based on the people's expectations, the welcome Jesus receives in Jerusalem is fitting of the hopes they had for their Messiah. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" If this Jesus is truly the Messiah, then he will come and establish

David's kingdom here and now. The people shall welcome him as a king who is returning from battle – with palms and cloaks and shouts of joy and celebration. This shall be the day that will be remembered as a day of rejoicing, a day of triumph for the Lord!

But as we look closer at the story and the events that follow, we soon realize that Jesus does not fit neatly into the people's impressions of the Messiah. This king of kings rides into the city not on a fine steed, but on the back of a pack mule, a donkey that has never been ridden before. In Matthew's gospel, as soon as Jesus has entered amid such celebration, he goes straight to the temple and completely disrupts the day's business and trade. He throws the money-changers out, he condemns those who are selling and trading livestock and birds, he overturns tables and chairs and makes an absolute mess of everything. As we know, later in the week Jesus teaches and heals and does things that challenge the Pharisees to no end. Instead of overthrowing the Romans who are in control, this Messiah is instead challenging his own people's religious authority, and in so doing he causes so much anger and hostility that it gets him killed.

In a real sense, Palm Sunday is about the one who comes not in arrogance, but in humility. It is about the one who comes to cheers of praise, and is ready to face the trials when no one else will. It is about the one who comes to model humble service to his followers, including me and you.

One of the things we talked about Tuesday in our bible study was verse 10: "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'" Some of our translations interpreted "turmoil" as "stirred", "unnerved", or "with excitement." But the Greek word used here actually translates as "was shaken" or "trembled." In other words, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken and trembled." His entry was not solely a joyful parade, filled with praise. His entry caused tumult, trembling, and shook the city to its core.

One commentator offered an imaginative depiction of why it was so tumultuous. *Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. The one from the east was largely composed of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee, riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a warhorse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He has come from Caesarea Maritima for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God, while Pilate's procession proclaimed the power of empire, thereby embodying the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion* (ibid, 153).

Jesus, as he has done throughout his earthly ministry prior to this day, causes tumult for the sake of God's kingdom. While the people

seek an overthrow of their Roman oppressors, Jesus challenges their allegiance and faith, overturning not just money tables but also their long-established beliefs. When he is faced with power and might, he counters with humility and peace. Palm Sunday is a precursor to the events that follow, when in a week our Lord will offer love in the face of betrayal, and humility in the face of death.

I shared with the Bible Study on Tuesday that I felt there was a parallel in this passage to our life at the present. When the whole city asks, “Who is this?” when Jesus arrives, it seems to me we could be asking right now, “What is this?” as we deal with the turmoil of our lives. What is this disruption, chaos, illness, heartbreak, anxiety – what is this that has caused us so much unrest?

The other parallel I thought of is how quickly things change. These same crowds that welcome Jesus with shouts of “Hosanna!” will shout “Crucify him!” only five days later. That’s pretty shocking, but it’s a part of this passion narrative that we usually acknowledge each year, then quickly forget as we celebrate resurrection hope.

Except this year, that sudden change is palpable and real for us. Our lives have ground to a halt with little warning. Family members, friends, or neighbors are getting sick in a matter of days. Hospitals are in surge protocols after just two weeks. The whiplash of sudden change is our new normal, isn’t it?

How do we find strength, comfort, hope in the midst of these sudden changes, in the middle of all this turmoil?

Someone in the Bible Study this week shared even in this chaotic time, God is present. I read a quote on Facebook this week which said something to this effect: This virus is not an act of God – it is an act of nature. The act of God comes in how we care for one another and our world. In the chaos of the first Palm Sunday, God was present. In the chaos and turmoil of Holy Week, God was present. In the chaos and turmoil of the coronavirus, God is present.

As we all prepare to journey through Holy Week in a very different way than ever before, may we trust and believe that even in a city in turmoil, God is present, in visible and unseen ways, and will never leave us. For that is the promise of this week – that not even death or the grave can keep God’s love from this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.