

“Bring Palms!”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia via Facebook Live

10:30 am April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Matthew 21:1-11

“Open to me the gates of righteousness,” the Psalmist proclaims.

But, who is righteous? Is it people who shelter in place, wear face masks when they must go out, and generally sacrifice their conveniences and comforts for the well-being of their communities?

Are the righteous ones our medical workers and emergency first responders, who signed up to be helpers and healers but never imagined they would be drafted into a war zone?

Are the righteous ones the Christians who are bold enough to go to church in the midst of a pandemic, risking their lives and those of others to worship God? Or are the righteous ones the homebound faithful, participating in worship as the Spirit reaches them through tablets, computer screens and smartphones, as you are worshipping now?

“Open to me the gates of righteousness.” I understand the longing of the Psalmist. As I went running twice last week, my route led me running alongside multiple parks in town that were gated off. They were gated off, but *not really* gated off. There were orange cones blocking the entrance to Overpeck Park. At the Station Parkway footpath that goes over the train tracks, there was a strip of yellow tape and a sign that said “Park Closed.” As I gazed longingly at the green fields and fluffy cherry blossoms on the other side of that flimsy, yellow tape, and the winding, waterside paths beyond the 5-6 orange cones blocking the driveway entry, I thought how easy it would be to jog right through them, and enjoy the park all to myself. In fact, I noticed at least a dozen easy entry points to New and Old Overpeck Park. They taunted me. With no one else there, I wouldn’t have to worry about viral germs or masks. As the sole witness, I could be an audience of one to the show nature puts on when no other humans are around. If I had my skates, I could go as fast as I wanted without fear of collision. Don’t I deserve to be in the park? I wasn’t one of the ones who was clustering before the parks closed down. It’s not fair that the righteous get punished for the misdeeds of the unrighteous, is it?

Eric Hwang from our church pointed out to me that the Chinese character for *justice* is made up of the character for right, followed by the character for righteousness. Which makes me think, hmmm, is there something such as *wrong* righteousness?

It did occur to me that it would be a wrong righteousness to think *I* deserve to go into the park while others could not, or to put our hard-working police in the position of having to tell me to leave when they have such more important matters to face.

But the longing remained, and my voice joined the voice of the Psalmist in calling out, "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!" Did you know that the word Hosanna means *save*, or *rescue*? I want the gates open. But it occurs to me that *they will be opened through love*, and **not** through prioritizing my needs and privileges over someone else's.

Our efforts to shelter in place seem to be working. Another encounter I had on yesterday's run-- a human one-- was with Ingrid Brennen, who was outside doing some gardening. I always feel more peaceful when I talk to Ingrid. She told me, while standing a safe distance back, the good news that for three days in a row, Hackensack Hospital's Emergency Room admissions kept steady. Numbers are still high, but no increases points to the hope that in that part of town, maybe the virus is peaking. The White House announced last night that in the next 6-7 days, New York's virus cases will peak-- but the surge leading up to it will include a painful increase in lives lost. It is important now, more than ever, to keep our resolve for social distancing, but we can do so knowing that we are starting to see some glimmers of hope that ***it is working***. And our efforts are not only for our own well-being; they are sacrifices of love, for the medical workers, for the elderly, for the immune-compromised, and for the neighbors and strangers who may have none of these conditions but could still find themselves in that thin boundary between life and death if they get this virus.

We walk alone now, so that we can walk together tomorrow when we see the day of God's salvation. And so, Palm Sunday this year is a bit of a lonely parade. I encouraged our members to step out at 9:30 today in front of their homes with DIY palms, and shout Hosanna! I asked this knowing how absurd it will seem to neighbors on your street to have such a theatrical display, and indeed, some have told me so much. But really, at this point, *what do we have to lose?* I'm talking to you out there who showed up at a Zoom meeting last week without showering and still in your PJ's (OK I am guilty of this too)--are you saying you're embarrassed to wave a branch and say Hosanna? If we make someone laugh at us, at least we have brightened their day.

If we express our hope in Jesus coming through the gates, maybe we have given them something to hope for too; even if they don't believe in the same religion as us, perhaps they can believe in our hope.

Passover begins on Wednesday. Among my Jewish friends is a family that will try to throw together a Seder, even though they won't be able to gather all the ritual elements of the meal, and even, more sadly to them, they cannot gather the loved ones who make this meal feel complete. Another Jewish family we are friends with is headed by two doctors, with young children at home. As the Passover approaches, I wonder if someone should find a lamb so they can throw blood on their doorposts, as the Hebrews did way back in Egypt, to protect them and make sure that the Angel of Death passes over their household. The elements of the Passover Seder recall the sufferings of the Hebrews in captivity in Egypt: the salt water representing the tears; the bitter herbs that recall the suffering under years of slavery; the flat matzoh, which recalls the escape that was so quick that they grabbed the dough for bread before the yeast could cause it to rise.

I wonder if any of the foods we are making do with right now will have holy significance later on as we remember this painful period, and also celebrate how God and science and human cooperation opened the gates and freed us from it.

The Passover meal has symbolic echoes into history, and likewise, Jesus' processional parade into Jerusalem echoes into history. The festal procession with branches and shouts of "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" we hear in Matthew are lifted straight from the book of Psalms. I also see echoes into another kind of procession-- Joseph and Mary, processing into Bethlehem, where Jesus would be born-- only to have to escape the assassination attempts on his young life by Herod. As Jesus enters the gates to Jerusalem on a donkey, he is getting ready for a different kind of birth-- one that will also involve persecution by the State and even his death-- but this death would be a birth that would bring him into a cosmic existence so that he could be with us always.

In the coming week, we will do lots of remembering. On Maundy Thursday, as we retell the story of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, we will take communion together through our screens, and listen as church members retell the stories of their Last Supper-- the last meal they shared in public with loved ones, before we were told we must shelter in place. On Good Friday, I am working with the Methodist pastor and the Episcopal priest in town to create a self-guided Good Friday walk. The week will

remember the loneliness of what Jesus experienced on his way to the cross. As one meme going across the internet says, "This is the Lentiest Lent we've ever Lented."

But the time is getting closer, and our salvation is at hand, Righteous ones. Yes, that's right, I called you righteous. I am not naming you as righteous because you are above sin. I am not naming you as righteous because you are better than others. I am naming you as righteous, because you, who are sitting at home behind your computer screens, are taking part in the steadfast love of God. Your love of one another and your commitment to the common good unites you with the steadfast love of God. The coronavirus will last months. People will get sick, some will stay healthy, some will die. In time, there is hope that science will produce better testing, better treatments, and maybe even a vaccine. I promise you, we will come to the point where we can look back and praise God that it is over. But God's love is not over and never will be. The Psalmist says God's "steadfast love endures forever!" You can't wash your hands of it. And though we march in a lonely parade, we do so knowing there will be the day when we can all march together, blessing God's name. Amen.