

“Branching Out”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Palm Sunday April 2, 2023

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21:1-11

In this month in particular, I have been immersed in interfaith connections. We are preparing for some of our Confirmands to do a site visit to Dar-ul Islah, a mosque in Teaneck during Ramadan, and I was asked to give a prayer for unity and peace at an Interfaith Grand Iftar last night. I sat at a table with a rabbi, an Imam, and I feel like there should be a joke that comes after that.. but April Fool’s Day was yesterday, so I guess I’m off the hook. On Friday I was spending time with some Jewish friends and they were asking about Holy Week, and if I had to write extra sermons this week. I told them it’s a lot of extra liturgy, but without extra sermons beyond what is shared on Sundays; with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we leave it to the prayers, the scripture reading, the reenactment of the Last Supper, and music to tell of Jesus’ meal with friends, his betrayal, his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death. I told my Jewish friends, “It starts out joyful, with Palm Sunday and the meal that tells of the Last Supper. But then it gets kind of heavy and hard.”

“Oh, so it’s like a reversal of Passover” my Jewish friend replied– which is true, because the Passover begins with slavery and oppression, and it ends with joyful and triumphant liberation– while Palm Sunday starts as joyful, but then is the gateway for some heart-wrenching events that Jesus must go through at the end of his life. This is necessary, before we can have Easter.

It’s interesting what other faiths can teach us about our own faith. We ask that our Confirmation youth each take time to visit a congregation different from our own– either a place of a different religion than Christianity, or if another Christian church, it should have an ethnic majority that’s different from this church, or it should be something other than Protestant. There are at least two things that being an outsider in a culture not your own can do: first, it helps us to have understanding and empathy for others who are experiencing life as outsiders, as it builds bridges of understanding so that those we saw as strangers can become friends. And second, being an outsider causes us to think in a new way about what is important about our faith and values, because we no longer take it for granted.

An analogy I will make comes from school. I’ve noticed that schools don’t teach grammar much these days. They encourage reading. They encourage writing– and in elementary school we were told that the teachers don’t want to slow kids down; they didn’t want to inhibit expression by burdening children with complex grammar rules. “Just get their ideas down on paper,” my child’s teacher told us in the parent-teacher conference. Hopefully, if they read enough, they will learn grammar by osmosis, and for what they don’t learn, the computer spell and grammar-check will refine.

But even though I had years of grammar instruction through school, even though I may be one of the few geeks who found joy and beauty in the order of diagramming sentences, I did not learn all I needed to know about grammar from English classes. It's when I started studying **French** that I noticed things about *English* that I had never learned before. Like the subjunctive verb tense— we spent a whole semester in French class mastering the subjunctive tense; however, I can't remember any English teacher even mentioning it. I figured out on my own that the subjunctive does get used in English, and so I started to use it. Sometimes it requires that I think more formally of how I write, but I do remember getting a comment from my English professor on my first written essay in college, "Elegant use of the subjunctive, Leah."

In a similar way, branching out to friends of other faith traditions can help us look at our own faith practices in a different light, and see and notice things we never appreciated before.

Now I have learned the basics of biblical Greek and biblical Hebrew, but I don't know how to throw around fancy verb tenses in these languages, and I am guessing that Jesus' followers couldn't either. They most likely spoke in the vernacular; the fancy, highly educated words were more the domain of the Roman elites.

Still, we can learn more about who Jesus was in comparison to the dominant culture that surrounded him.

Jesus entered Jerusalem from the East, coming from Bethphage— a town whose name means, in Aramaic, "House of Unripened Figs." From there, Jesus sent two disciples, to get a donkey and her colt. The parade as Jesus entered through the East gate into Jerusalem was cheered by a gathering of peasants, throwing down palms and their very cloaks to welcome Jesus into the holy city.

But on the other side of Jerusalem, another processional was occurring. The Feast of the Passover was approaching, which meant that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea, would have been riding into Jerusalem as well— but from his seaside palace, into the West gate into the city. While Jesus would have ridden on a dusty donkey, from the little town that means *house of the not-yet ripened fig*, Pilate would have been mounted on a stallion coming from his palace of prestige. Snap of leather, clink of armor, accompanied by soldiers bearing weapons rather than peasants throwing cloaks. Pilate came to Jerusalem for the Passover not out of empathy and connection, as the reason I attended an interfaith Iftar last night. No. Rather he came to make sure that this festival of the Passover— which celebrated the Jews' liberation against an earlier oppressive ruler, Pharaoh— didn't spark any insurrection. Pilate, as a representative of the Emperor, had to make sure that stories like the Passover stayed in the past where they belonged, and no one used the power of that story to demand liberation in the present.

Remember, Roman imperial theology taught that the Emperor was the manifestation of God on earth. Ancient inscriptions refer to the emperor as “Son of God,” “Lord,” “Savior.”¹

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argued that Jesus’ march into Jerusalem— with the crowds shouting, “Hosannah”— which means “Lord, save us, please!” and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” – served as a political parody of Pilate’s imperial march on the other side of town. In other words, the Palm Sunday Parade was about as scandalous as a drag show in a public square in a small town in Tennessee right now.

The palm branches Jesus’ followers waved evoke the Jewish festival of Sukkot, which is the festival of booths. When I had my first interfaith clergy meeting after I moved here in Leonia, it was during Sukkot. We had to plan the Thanksgiving service, and so the Rabbi invited us to meet outside in the booth that Congregation Adas Emuno had in its yard. This festival is for a week, and it comes after the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Jews are instructed by Torah to construct a booth, with palm leaves as the roof, as a reminder of the temporary, moveable dwellings they lived in during the 40 years of wandering through the wilderness.

By throwing palm branches before Jesus, maybe his followers were saying that Jesus *is* our dwelling place— even if his body is temporary. They would see that for themselves in days to come.

What can we say of these people who dared to join in a parade that mocked the imperial rule of Rome, and dared to suggest that Jesus brought in a new kind of rule they would follow and worship? What can we say of these same people who would disappear their support once the mood shifted from play-acting to something more dangerous and real, when Jesus was actually brought up on charges of insurrection?

Maybe we would say they weren’t so different from us today. Our love and commitment to the ways of Christ can be temporary and moveable, kind of like a booth.

It seems to me, however, even as we between closeness and distance to the ways of Jesus, Jesus still finds a way toward us. It’s interesting to me that the most powerful connection I have felt during the season of Lent has not been inside of the church, although I cherish the times that I can pray with you. What has been most powerful to me has been preparing for and meeting the Alizada family, which I know so many in our church and community have also helped to do. They are so grateful for all the church has been able to provide for them, and they hope to come to our congregation in the coming weeks to meet you and to thank you. I met them initially on Monday and spent an evening with them on Thursday night as I drove them to a Church World Service event. Their sense of hope in their new home and the possibilities, combined with the dislocation and grief over the loss of the country and people of their belonging, put me into the frame of mind of all the hope and grief Jesus brings into Holy Week.

¹ Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, “The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Tell Us About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem, p. 161.

Our congregation's accompaniment of them teaches us something of what it means to accompany Jesus through these coming days.

Jesus is with us, but his body is only temporary. That means that we need to learn to *branch out*, and look for cues for his spiritual presence in the people and places around us. Those places outside the scope of the church may even be our most powerful teachers about who Jesus is and how he may show up. I am not saying leave the church or neglect to come to worship. But I am inviting you to notice that worship can happen all around you, and Jesus can show up in any place and any person.

So whether at work, at school, in the streets, in the club, at the grocery store: be ready to lay down your palm branches. Cast down your cloaks. Make way. Jesus is coming.