

“Fickle Followers, Steadfast Savior”

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March 24, 2024 Palm Sunday

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

Like many of our stories and rituals, the Palm Sunday parade is an act of remembrance. The author Toni Morrison once spoke about the water’s ability to remember at a public talk at the New York Public Library:

“You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact, it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place.”¹

As we watched waters pool in response to the heavy and persistent rainfall yesterday, it got me wondering whether those waters were *remembering* where they once gathered in the years before development took their place.

Every year, we recite the story of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the gathering that surrounded him. Every year, we reenact the memory of that parade in some way. In 2021, when we were still showing great caution due to the pandemic, we held an outdoor flashmob to the song *Jerusalema* by South African DJ Master KG. It gives me great joy to see our group of all ages dancing in the church parking lot, even as the fact that we were wearing masks outside betrays the fear we lived in then. That song, *Jerusalema*, spoke of a longing for a spiritual home. The longing in this song spoke to people globally in the height of the pandemic, when everyone was longing for a place of safety, connection, and freedom that was missing in those early days of COVID.

Even though there are slight differences in how each gospel tells this story, we get basically the same story every year. There are some stories that we repeat, over and

¹ Minister Candace Simpson quotes Morrison in “Mark 11:1-39 (40-47) in *Enfleshed: Liturgy that Matters*. March 24, 2024.

over again, so that they get ingrained in our consciousness. Even though the landscape of our lives can and does change from the moment when the story happened, the etchings made by these stories still create a geography on our lives.

It may be hard to see when we are so far removed by thousands of years and by physical distance, but this Palm Sunday parade which welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem reenacts many themes or passageways that were already present in the faithful imagination of the Jewish people at Jesus' time.

Last night I saw two of our church kids act in a community theater production of *Fun Home*. I've watched these kids grow up here in Leonia and at church. I have a good sense of who they are and what they are about. But on the stage, they each became someone else, as they filled out their roles. It was some pretty good acting!

We, too, inhabit the story, as we reenact the story of the Palm Sunday parade. We *become* the story.

My Jewish friends are acting out the story of Esther in the great festival of Purim this weekend. If you don't know the story, it is of a young woman, Esther, who gets chosen as the Persian King Ahasuerus' wife. Esther is a Jew, but that is not known to the king. The king's chief advisor, Haman, has a plot to kill all the Jews. Esther's cousin Mordechai instructs her to come out to the king as a Jew, just at the right moment, and to cause the king to flip Haman's plot of destruction, so that it happens to Haman instead. She does, and she saves her people from genocide.

The story has lots of plot twists and humor, and so when the scroll— called the Megillah— gets read, listeners come in costume, because Esther initially “masked” her identity. When Haman's name is read, people boo and hiss to cover up his name, because he had evil intentions. When Mordechai's name is read, people cheer and applaud, since he and Esther devise a plan to save the Jews. In some Purim festivals, the adults drink during the reading, and so everything gets confused, and people cheer for Haman, and boo for Mordechai. That's the topsy-turvy nature of the story.

Most Jews from Jesus' time were illiterate. And so instead of reading the stories, they were performed. You can see the script of the rich traditions of the Hebrew bible in the parade and the preparation for it. Jesus travels from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, which the Hebrew prophet Zechariah predicted that God would come from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, along with a flow of living water that will stretch from sea to sea, and become king over all the earth.

So when Jesus approached from the Mount of Olives, those in Jerusalem *who knew their scriptures* could see the role Jesus was taking on, and they believed him. The branches which people waved reenacted the Jewish festival of Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, which built a living memory to the times when the Hebrews escaped enslavement in Egypt, and had no permanent shelter, but they slept in booths. In Leviticus God instructed them, “Take branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days,” and with those branches make temporary shelters, as a reminder of the time when God liberated them, and they made booths in the wilderness while they relied on God.

The Jews of Jesus’ time didn’t live under a Pharaoh. But they did live under Roman occupation, which was another form of oppression from which they longed for liberation. So waving the palm branches showed a faith that this Jesus would liberate them again, as Moses had done to the Hebrews when they were enslaved in Egypt. As Jesus entered, they threw down their coats— like a red carpet for royalty— and cried out, “Hosanna!” which means “save us, now!”

Nearly 30 years ago, I felt my heart race when the Dykes on Bikes revved their engines at my first Pride Parade. They projected power and hope in a public way, moving into a society that had once shamed them, and they convinced me that the world would be different for me, and that I could claim my space in it, too. I can only imagine how much love and hope was projected onto Jesus in that moment at the gates of Jerusalem. So why, only a few days later, did so many people turn against him?

The liturgical movement in the Presbyterian Church urges congregations to read *both* the joyful story of Palm Sunday on this day, alongside the painful story of Jesus’ Passion— that is, his suffering and death on the cross— on this day. Mostly this is out of recognition that the majority of Christians skip the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, and they don’t want you to skip to the resurrection without bearing witness to the awful cruelty of the cross. We tend to just do the Palm Sunday readings, with hope that you can get to our really meaningful Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. But I will ask you to bear witness to the shadows that loom over this parade. For in a matter of days, the cheers become jeers, and the crowd becomes topsy-turvy, demanding Jesus’ death instead of celebrating his life.

My pastor colleague Katherine Willis Pershey points out the continuing violence of this story. She says, “Not only did the crowd’s fickle loyalties contribute to the crucifixion of one Jewish man; the interpretation of that crowd’s fickle loyalties has contributed to the death of millions more.” She is speaking of how Christians, for many centuries, blamed

and persecuted Jews for the death of Jesus, even as they reaped the benefits of an Easter that would not have happened without his death.

Jesus was a Jew himself, and rather than seeing his crucifixion as a story of Jews killing one of their own, scholarship has indicated that it was really his threat to the dominance of the Roman empire that killed him. But instead of figuring out who was to blame, we must be able to see that it is within each of us to have this fickle nature, this faith in violence as a means for peace, and this lack of any sustaining hope in the changes God can bring to our world today.

Still, even as fickle as we are, God's love is steadfast, and seeks to save us— despite the worst of our tendencies towards violence and our lack of faith. Or maybe, because of it? For if we did not have these tendencies, then would we really *need* saving?

Salvation in our mythology looks like someone swooping in on a stallion, to be the mighty hero. But the salvation Jesus offers comes in on a lowly donkey, and instead of conquest, he gets killed. A donkey, though it is not as glamorous as a stallion, has steadfast legs that can lead a heavy load through the trickiest of terrain. A donkey may not get glory, but it can get the job done. The overlooked glory of Jesus' passion asks us whether we are willing to be saved in ways that do not conquer, but instead increase compassion for those who are also at the brink of death. As we look at the geography of our lives today, including the divisions that we feel not only in our countries and politics but even in our very bodies, are we willing to release blame and instead find reason for mutual hope? Jesus offered his body for our salvation. Instead of waiting for God to storm down from the mountains, can we also consider that our bodies and our lives can be instruments for the vision of heaven, of justice and of peace God wants to create here on earth?

As this Palm Sunday story etches its imprint on you, may it mark you as **prepared** for the kind of salvation Jesus might offer you in the coming days.