

Palm Sunday 2017

Matthew 21:1-11

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This past week, I hesitated as I signed off on an email to my interfaith clergy colleagues...do I say Happy Passover and Holy Week? Do I just go right on to Happy Easter? No, none of those are correct. It's hard to know WHAT to say to those for whom we wish a deepened spiritual experience during this sacred season.

We're in that upside down period of our liturgical calendar, when the crowds are jubilant one moment, with all of the hopes and aspirations of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and then very quickly, as the week progresses, they are in mourning-- Jubilant to horrified to sorrowful. The whole gamut of human emotion.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, let's stay in the jubilation for a bit. Here in Matthew's text, the crowds around Jesus had been building for a while. Word about him had spread. There had been great hope as they had seen Jesus' healings and fulfillment of the prophecies they had long heard. And now, this was it, the "grand" procession into Jerusalem signifying his royalty, but in a very different way than the Emperor. This was to be the culmination of Jesus' journey. They waved their palms. They laid a carpet consisting of their coats and branches to make way for the one who would fulfill not only their hopes but the hopes for generations to come.

As I read this text, I was reminded of a similar call. I went back to the early chapters of Matthew's Gospel. John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus in chapter 3, called out to the people with the words of the prophet Isaiah (we know them as popularized by Handel in The Messiah): "The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare ye, the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Here in our text this morning, the people are in essence, preparing a way for the Lord as he makes his way into Jerusalem. Throughout his time with the people who had listened to him and witnessed his actions, Jesus did so to encourage people to prepare the way of the Lord...to make the way clear so that God could come in full glory.

That may sound good, but what does that mean? What on earth can WE do to prepare the way of the Lord?

Famed preaching professor Fred Craddock tells the following story about his family. *"My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being later when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants*

*another name, another pledge, another name, and another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of the game? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said.*

*Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, "There's one now, sic him, get him, get him," and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, "The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge." I guess I heard it a thousand times.*

*One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and he said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat.*

*I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.*

*He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story, Craddock said. He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."*

*I said, "What is your story, Daddy?"*

*And he wrote, "I was wrong."*

Each card or email you write; each meal you make; each mission trip you go on; each time you welcome the stranger; each time you stand up for someone who needs the voice of justice; each time you forgive someone who has done you great harm...you make the way clear for God to enter into that person's life in a new way. This is a partnership. We are co-creators with God. God needs us in this world to open up the ways and prepared the way for something grand to happen, even if we cannot see it right away.

But beware, the acts of preparing the way are not always well received nor are they easy. They don't always come as easily as sacrificing one's coat or waving branches...even in as in this case, it is an act of political statement.

The text says, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil. The word there for turmoil when translated implies the force as if there were an earthquake. The political turmoil and unrest ripe for something big to take place.

Make no mistake, the life of discipleship and preparing the way of the Lord requires our full willingness, our readiness and our awareness. It can be scary and even dangerous at times, and may require acts of self-sacrifice and bravery as well. Just look at whom we follow.

On the night of March 6, 1987, a cross-channel sea ferry carrying 500 people sank in a Belgium sea port, 90 seconds after leaving harbor. The assistant petty officer had fallen asleep and had forgotten to close the bow doors. The first officer hadn't been present to check and see if the bow doors had been closed and another officer had seen the doors were open but hadn't closed them because it wasn't his job.

So water gushed into the open doors and the ship capsized with the loss of nearly 200 of the 500 lives on board that night.

Later investigations revealed culpabilities of complacency of every level of management. Almost every aspect of human depravity contributed to the disaster. There were, however, acts of courage and bravery as well.

Assistant Bank manager Andrew Parker, a passenger on board that night was one such hero. He saw two metal barriers about 5 to 6 feet apart and below in the gap between them, gushing water rising quickly. Behind him on one side of the barriers were dozens of people. The pathway to safety was on the other. There wasn't much time to think. So Parker held onto one barrier with his fists and the other with his ankles, making a human bridge by stretching between the two barriers. Some 20 terrified people including his own wife and daughter climbed over him to safety. How he found the courage and physical strength, to stay taut as people his own weight crossed over him, only God knows.

Parker made it as well, and his decision to act, to lay down his life not only for his loved ones, but also for many people he didn't even know, brought a miracle even in the midst of great loss. The depths of human failure and the heights of love all in one night. Greater love hath no man than this than one lay down his life for his friends.

So what do we do with this text and the story throughout this week? How do we continue to stay ready to prepare the way of the Lord at a moment's notice? Here's an invitation...

A colleague once wrote: "When the Rabbi's read they walk into the text. They bring themselves to it and step across the edge of the scroll, jump up onto its body, bouncing a little, believing it will hold their weight. And then on hands and knees, they crawl through the furrows of words, examining, brushing away dirt, not like an archeologist hoping to unearth some dead, hardened thing but like a botanist examining growth patterns and evidence of the soil's mineral content, water content or whether there is deep clay. And then they look for the cracks in the soil from which the word emerged. It is the cracks, the gaps that will allow them a way in." (Rev. Rathburn Russell)

This week, I urge you to consider reading through the Holy Week narratives, and allowing yourself to get inside the texts and let them work on you. Walk into the lessons from Matthew, chapter 27, crawl around a bit, and let them draw you ever deeper into the journey yet to be made - the journey to a common meal, a trial, a crucifixion, and a burial. Bear witness to who this Jesus is. He arrives on the doorstep of Jerusalem and the Temple with a life's journey

behind him. He arrives there and we join him bearing witness to who he is and what he has done. This is a moment for us to be present with Jesus in his sacred footsteps towards the cross. We can't get to next Sunday without going through this week, so walk it with him.

So how should I have responded in my email to my interfaith colleagues? Perhaps, it would be...may you continue to prepare the way. Courage to you on the journey.

May it be so Amen!

Let us pray:

Holy one, speak the word that all the weary long to hear. Your Son humbles himself to carry the cross that your people long to embrace. As we enter this holy week, let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. Empty us of ourselves, and draw us close to his cross, that, comforted by his word of forgiveness and gladdened by his promise of Paradise, into your hands we may commend our spirits. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

(From Prayers for Sunday and Seasons, Year A, Peter J. Scagnelli, LTP, 1992.)