

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

Matthew 21:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11

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[The Last Week, Borg and Crossan, pages 2 and 3. John O'Donohue's To Bless the Space Between Us: a book of blessings, quote from "For one who is exhausted, a blessing.]

Dear friends in Christ Jesus, grace, peace, liberation, and justice to you. Amen.

We enter into this holy week—today—first with palms,

and then with the passion of our brother and savior Jesus, and his community.

In Matthew's telling of Palm Sunday and the procession into Jerusalem, he comments that the whole city is in turmoil, trying to figure out who this Jesus' fellow is.

We know a thing or two about turmoil, don't we?

Quite honestly the whole world seems to be in turmoil about the pandemic:

how to slow it,

how to safe guard those most vulnerable,

how to respond with justice and with love,

how go on with so much grief, so much anxiety,

how to stem the economic fallout.

Today I want to offer three things in this turmoil: a reminder, an invitation, and then a word of grace.

First the reminder, and not a reminder like you should know this already,

but more a reminder about context.

This may be familiar to some, for I can scarcely go through Palm Sunday without mentioning this context.

Historians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan went back and pieced together the culture, the records, of Jesus' time.

They remind us that there were two processions in Jerusalem that spring day that we call Palm Sunday in the year 30.

The one we re-enact with palms and Jesus riding a donkey and cries of Hosanna—that was the peasant procession; it entered Jerusalem on the east side.

The other procession came in from the west.

It was an imperial procession with Pontius Pilate flanked by columns of cavalry, marching foot soldiers, leather armor, banners flapping, weapons clanking, drums beating.

This "motorcade" ushered in Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, arriving, as he did every year at this time, to keep order in the city during the Jewish festival of Passover.

So there are two distinct processions, but the similarities are striking.

As good protests often are, the peasant procession was most likely meant to be ironic.

Jesus' procession was a counter-procession, if you will.

The imperial procession honored the Roman Emperor who the people worshiped with titles like savior, lord.

The other procession, the palm procession, the peasant procession, lauded this humble Jesus,
who preached mercy, and welcomed sinners,
and dared cross the powers of the time.

Two processions: that alone would raise the tension in the city, create some turmoil.

Add in the coming Passover, the streets swelling with pilgrims making preparations.

Then there were the politics in that city occupied by the Romans,
people pushing back on the oppressor's heavy thumb.

Don't forget the intricate dance between the religious authorities and the Roman hierarchy.

Remember the processions, the turmoil.

Here's the invitation: This Holy Week, perhaps more than ever before, we invite you to enter into the
activity, enter into the story, enter into the meaning.

These are intense and new times, feelings are running high.

There's a lot of dust and brokenness, a lot of passion, a lot of beauty.

Let the turmoil guide *your* faithfulness this week.

Don't settle for someone else's meanings or the way we've "always thought of it".

Rather, enter into what meaning *you* are finding in Jesus' life and death and resurrection, right now.

Which procession will you follow?

The imperial procession lauding the empire? Or Jesus' peasant procession, creating justice?

Join in the sacred actions of Maundy Thursday:

Jesus' last supper with his friends,
the holy vulnerability, the holy love, of washing and being washed,
the power of confessing and hearing forgiveness.

Join in the passion of Good Friday.

Where are today's crosses?

Who or what is being killed by the structures, the powers?

Who is shouting in protest?

Who is keeping vigil?

How do we respond?

Join in Saturday's Easter Vigil, hear the salvation story told anew in our community,
laugh and cry together,
taste the sweet power of life.

Our Minister of Music and Worship and Music, Zach, has created a Holy Week Toolkit with all sorts of ways to live more deeply into this week.

In this time of staying home, some of you have a surplus of time and you may be looking for ways to engage.

Others are scrambling, constantly trying to keep up with kids or work or other needs.

Engage this Holy Week on your own terms, in your own way.

Join us when possible for the evening services on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

And remember that you've got the option to view after the fact, whenever works for you.

Finally, a word of grace:

Irish, celtic, poet and priest, John O'Donohue has a lovely little book of blessings.

One is a blessing for those who are exhausted.

Some of us are exhausted physically by demands of all sorts.

Others are exhausted spiritually or mentally or emotionally, there is just so much...

O'Donohue writes in that blessing, "Be excessively gentle with yourself."

This Holy Week, at a time when we remember Jesus' living and dying,

it's easy to wear ourselves down.

The beauty of this week is that we become totally and utterly clear again that Jesus is our Savior, not you, not me.

It's Jesus' love, Jesus' vulnerability, Jesus' power that shapes ours.

There is space, then, for grace, especially in these vulnerable days.

Dear friends in Christ, be excessively gentle with one another.

"Be excessively gentle with yourself."

For Jesus walks at our side, and dies that we and our world may have life. Amen.