

"When you read the sermon for yourself - try to hear Pastor Paula's tone and pace of speech. This sermon is written to be spoken and may not be grammatically correct. If you would like to hear it go to the UCC Sanbornton YouTube channel any time - search for the date the sermon was given." Pastor Paula

March 28, 2021

Liturgy

Psalm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

“Are You Ready?”

Pray with me please: Holy God, May the words that have come to me this day for this message be pleasing to you and in some small way draw each of us who hear closer to you! Amen

I have always loved Palm Sunday since I was a little girl – I think it’s the energy of spring and new life that seems to happen around Palm Sunday. When I was a child my Congregational Church never had an Ash Wednesday service; a Maundy Thursday service or even a Good Friday worship service. Only the Catholic kids had to go to all those. So, in my child-like brain Palm Sunday was the fun Sunday kind of announcing that spring and Easter were coming. For me it usually meant that my mother and I would have to find new shoes to match my new Easter dress and hat for Easter morning and that my towns huge Easter Egg hunt would be coming up next Saturday!

I had no clue that Jesus’ “parade” into Jerusalem was so political. The Roman Empire ruled, and the Jewish people were their subjects. During the major Jewish festivals, the Roman army would send into Jerusalem large numbers of military troops, to make sure that order was maintained when thousands of Jewish men, women and children arrived in the city to celebrate whichever festival was happening. This was especially true

on Passover, since this festival celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from the earlier empire – it made the Romans nervous that the Jewish people might take the opportunity to seek liberation from them with so many gathered in one place. You can see why the Romans would get anxious.

On the same day Jesus entered Jerusalem at the east entrance to the city – it was kind of like the back door to Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the west gate, the main gate on a war horse, at the head of a column of the imperial cavalry and soldiers. They were there to maintain law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover. Pilate's procession was a display of great imperial power, with the cavalry mounted on their horses, foot soldiers marching wearing leather armor and helmets, carrying weapons and banners **and** just in case people weren't intimidated enough, they also marched with live golden eagles mounted on poles. Can you hear the sounds.... the horses prancing down the street,... the rhythm of the marching soldier's feet, ...the clinging of the horses bridles and the beating of the drums? Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled.

Meanwhile, on the east side of the city Jesus' procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of town. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the vision of the Kingdom of God, a place of peace and justice for all and a community built on faith, forgiveness and love of neighbor. Joy not fear. Peasants, not soldiers, followed Jesus as he rode into town on a donkey, people spread their coats

and palm branches from the trees on the ground and sang out their Hosanna's. They spread their coats and palms as a royal welcome and so that the dust from the dry earth wouldn't be stirred up and go into Jesus' face. There weren't any prancing of horse's hoofs or marching feet or golden eagles; just men, women and children singing and celebrating. Jesus' ministry so captured the people's imaginations and nourished their souls that they followed him. They had supped with him, experienced his touch, witnessed his miracles and listened for the 'truth of God'. The peasants had experienced a presence so powerful, and a message so compelling, and a love so complete, that they were willing to step outside of the boundaries of religious and civil acceptability to journey to Jerusalem with Jesus.

Joyfully they shouted their Hosanna's, which means 'save us' and was used as a form of praise and adoration. While they processed with Jesus and sang their praises it appears that they had no concern or understanding for the potential danger ahead. They must have been aware that Jesus' message of 'love thy neighbor' and 'justice for all' would anger both the Romans and the Jewish leaders. Surely, they knew about the huge garrison of soldiers arriving at the other end of town? These were common folk, with uncommon courage standing together "for the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

One commentator said that Jesus' grand entry into Jerusalem looked like a very well planned political demonstration: Pilate in the west, riding a great military horse and Jesus, from the east, on a humble local donkey. Did they know or realize that their parade and following Jesus into Jerusalem might be understood as a protest, maybe even an uprising?

Jesus was not entering the city as the great military leader who would overthrow with violence, hate and weapons; he was offering a way of living in peace, together as one community of God. A life we all dream of, where people don't hurt one another but care and share with each other.

On Maundy Thursday we will gather remotely in our homes but together to worship and to remember Jesus' Last Supper with the disciples, and on Friday, we will remember Jesus' brutal death on the cross. We remember his passionate love for each of us and his passion for equality, justice, liberation, freedom and hope.

Today is a fun day with signing our hosannas and waving our palm branches, but we must remember the suffering and pain of the rest of Holy Week to be able to truly understand and experience the deep joy of Easter. Today is a day for us to recommit ourselves to the message of Jesus the Christ; his message of love thy neighbor, justice and peace. Today is the day that we can choose which parade we will join. Are you, are we, am I ready to enter the city of Jerusalem with Jesus? With love and joyfully singing our Hosanna's and at the same time risk being changed and transformed? Take a moment today to ask yourself, am I ready to be a follower of Jesus' teachings – forgiveness, grace, mercy, love of all creation, and hope? Which parade will you join today – a parade filled with power and greed or a parade filled with forgiveness, grace and love? Amen