

“Follow the Howlers”

Rev. David Gregory

April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday



First Reading

Matthew 21:1-3, 6-11 New Revised Standard Version

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Second Reading

from *Six Recognitions of the Lord* by Mary Oliver

Oh, feed me this day, Holy Spirit, with
the fragrance of the fields and the
freshness of the oceans which you have
made, and help me to hear and to hold
in all dearness those exacting and wonderful
words of our Lord Christ Jesus, saying:
Follow me.

David Gregory here, bringing you a message from the Community Congregational Church of Tiburon, California. We are an Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ, and we are happy to welcome you, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey. And life right now is exactly that, a journey, not unlike the journey of Abraham, that common ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, who, when called by God, set out on a journey toward an unknown destination. We are also moving forward in a direction that we do not fully understand. But each and every day, we are making

progress toward the world that we will inhabit on the other side of COVID-19. We will recognize aspects of it, but much will have changed. And we will have changed. We will have become different people from the ones we were just a few short weeks ago. Pieces of the life we knew are dying and falling away, leaving room for new things to be born in their place. Old habits are broken—out of necessity—and new practices are established.

As we begin this Holy Week, we are called into these cycles of death, burial, and resurrection in ways that take on a whole new meaning. Today is Palm Sunday, commemorating that pilgrimage by throngs of the poor and destitute into Jerusalem for the Passover. These were the common people, beaten down by the Roman occupation. And just as the Empire was busily showing off the pageantry of its military dominance, on the other side of the city, word spread among the peasants that a young insurgent rabbi, known as Jesus of Nazareth, was coming down the path behind them riding on a donkey.

It probably started with a few of them, looking back at him and shouting “Save us now!” or “Hosanna” in Aramaic. Soon others joined them, and then more and more until it became a full blown political demonstration, with people grabbing anything they could find—tree branches, cloaks—waving them, throwing them down in the path. And then, it says, they entered a city in turmoil. Turmoil was the last thing the Romans and their Jewish sympathizers wanted. This kingdom of God that Jesus talked about rather incessantly was really nothing short of a revolution, an upending of the status quo. It would bring justice for the poor, and the sick and the orphan. The last would become first, and the first would become last. Finally love would win.

We have had glimpses of this kingdom from time to time, but mostly it’s a revolution that we are still waiting for. We keep hearing that the world isn’t ready for it, but the longer the world languishes in the current pandemic, I wonder if that might not be changing after all. There is a new solidarity among us, despite all attempts to divide us. I hear it expressed in the nightly howling that goes on. The practice has actually been spreading across the globe. Basically, every night at 8 p.m. in any given time zone, people are opening their doors, standing on their porches or balconies and letting out a cathartic howl into the night. At its root it is designed to express solidarity with health care workers and first responders, those who are risking their very lives to care for others. In itself this is a wonderful thing. But as we have started joining in each night from our balcony overlooking downtown Novato, it feels a little like the demonstration on the way to Jerusalem. It starts with a yell over on a hillside, followed by four more down the street, and suddenly throngs of people are yelling, hooting and hollering. The first time I heard it, I wept. We’ve all been storing up this energy for some time, and when the energy is let loose, it feels empowering and unifying. This is not a pep rally, but rather the cries of people who are ready to say *enough of this*. Things are about to change, and they are about to change forever.

The Jesus we are reading about is not the blond-haired blue-eyed Jesus, the one created in our Caucasian image who was all sweetness, innocence, and light. This story is not about *that* Jesus. This Jesus is a rabble-rouser, an insurgent, a provocateur, who once he entered the city, stormed into the temple courts and started yelling and throwing things, violently overturning the economy of the sacrificial system, turning the tables of the money changers into a disaster scene. And then he escaped and was hiding in a garden a few nights later when they found him, arrested him, and took him to trial by the dark of night.

As a child I didn't really know what Palm Sunday was about. I suppose I thought of it as a celebration, like a mini-Easter when we get ourselves geared up for the true Easter to come. As children we waved the palm branches and sang the songs. But I don't think we ever really got the seriousness of the moment. It's not a feel-good holiday, nor should it be. Palm Sunday is a provocation, one whose effects we can still feel two thousand years later. There is still a groaning going on, and it's coming from the depths of the earth itself. It reaches us through our very grounded bodies and calls us into a collective heave and cry, or maybe even a howl.

What can be done to right the wrongs of humanity, to undo crimes against the earth, and to fan the embers of care and concern into a conflagration of love that will overpower all attempts to thwart it? Despite all attempts to divide us, we are united in our love for one another. I know this because whenever I make my supply runs to Trader Joe's, I see expressions of compassion and love that run counter to all the ugliness of our political divide. I don't see anyone's politics on display there. I see people who show care, and deference to one another, because they know that whether we choose it or not, we are all in this together. If sides must be chosen, the side that is called *love* will win. When people are reduced to the very essence of who they are, compassion will rule. When the need to pull together is the strongest, bitterness ceases. My faith in the inherent goodness of humanity, though it has been stretched to the limits, is stronger than ever.

Mary Oliver calls us to hold the dearness of Jesus's words when he says, "Follow me." She says that those words are exacting and wonderful. Wonderful because of the person who says them. Exacting because they may cut through everything we think we know about being Christians. Following Jesus on this Palm Sunday might mean that we have to speak up, speak out, or perhaps turn something upside down. And perhaps it starts with a bit of howling.

