

April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Matthew 21:1-11
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Matthew 26:14- 27:66

The tradition at St. Thomas's has long been to not have a sermon on Palm Sunday. The service is already very long, and, to be honest, it's nice for your priest to have one less thing to prepare heading into Holy Week. Of course, because *everything* is different this year, I feel I should say *something*. I expect that your Zoom attention span is already waning, so I will keep my comments short.

Palm Sunday worship is different from anything else we do as a church. It begins with the Liturgy of the Palms and, usually for us, a festive bagpipe-led parade around the church. Next thing you know, we're telling the story of Jesus' death. That shift—from festive to funereal—is jarring and unsettling.

We keep Palm Sunday the way we do at least in part because Palm Sunday and other Holy Week observances are modeled on the very early practices of the church in Jerusalem. We know about them thanks to a traveling Spanish nun named Egeria. She visited the Holy Land in the late fourth century and kept a diary about her experiences.

More than that, I think there is something quite genuine in the jarring and unsettling that Palm Sunday works in us. Barbara Streisand sang, "Don't rain on my parade," exactly because parades get rained on. Yes, we should get to have a parade once in a while. But sometimes bad fortune brings rain to our parade. And for some bad fortune makes every day rainy.

For me, Holy Week is always emotional and challenging. I can't always anticipate the direction from which the waves of feeling will come. They actually started coming last week, as I prepared the home version of The Way of the Cross that I mentioned in yesterday's Enews. I forget from year to year just how powerful that liturgy is. I even disagree with some of the theology it voices—and still it gets to me.

This year, Holy Week is especially complicated: Palm Sunday is layered atop recent events that were already plenty jarring and unsettling. Also, over the last year, some of you have had additional complicating life events—for example, the death of a loved one. When it comes to coronavirus, we are nowhere near Easter—at least, not yet. Therefore, when we think about edging toward liturgical Easter, the timing may feel very off. This week is supposed to be "the big one" for coronavirus here and around the United States. That's on top of the fact that we're all getting very tired of being cooped up and very worried about how all this will end. On the other hand, maybe the timing is perfect. Next Sunday, we *will* have our post-Holy Week Easter. And that will help us to know that, eventually, there *will* be a post-coronavirus Easter, too.

Meanwhile, we have to make it through Holy Week. I would normally encourage you to lean in to the jarring and unsettling of Palm Sunday. Today I say that only with extra caution attached. This year, experience Holy Week as fully as you can, while also being extra careful that it's not too much.

Last week I watched a TED talk by ecologist Suzanne Simard.¹ She's a biologist—a professor of forest ecology at the University of British Columbia. She's the woman who discovered that trees “communicate” with one another, sharing nutrients and even through fungal networks in the soil. Simard has called this the “wood wide web.”

I've had the privilege of visiting ancient forests like the ones Simard studied in the Pacific Northwest. In the cool damp understory, you can smell the rotting as it happens practically before your eyes. That compost that makes up the forest floor is filled with life, millions of organisms under every footstep. Scientists are only beginning to understand the complexity of life there.

Holy Week nudges us to dig around in soil that our human nature inclines us to leave undisturbed. If it's not too much, try to do a little digging this week. In that compost, is new life.

Notes

¹ Suzanne Simard, “Nature's Internet: How Trees Talk to Each Other in a Healthy Forest,” TEDx Seattle, February 2, 2017, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=breDQqrkikM> (accessed April 6, 2020).