

Sermon

The Sunday of the Passion with the Liturgy of the Palms

April 2nd, 2023

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9A; Psalm 31:9-16; Phillippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27:11-54

Holy moments. Holy moments are everywhere, all the time. Moments of intense celebration and praise. Moments of profound grief, sorrow and regret. Moments of fear and worry. Moments of longing, wondering. Moments when hope begins as a whisper, and then grows to a shout. Moments when sadness is gradually infused with that hope...

As many of you know, I've just returned from the Holy Land, where I am grateful to have experienced ten days of holy moments with my wise and beautiful daughter Annabel, and with our Bishop, Shane, and nearly 30 other pilgrims. I am so grateful for these holy moments, on the land and in the places where Jesus and the first disciples walked. I experienced all the moments I've just described: grief, sorrow, fear, worry, wondering, and also hope – profound hope – and celebration, and praise, and joy.

Here we are now, at Holy Week. As we walk with Jesus through the last week of his life, we are offered a whole range of holy moments. The jubilation of today's entry into Jerusalem: a holy moment. There is underlying tension rippling below the surface of those cries of "Blessed is he..." in that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and this is also a holy moment. Just as Jesus knew what Jerusalem meant for him, we know too, and we heard what Jerusalem means in the Passion Gospel we've just heard. We begin this Holy Week with the jubilation of palms held in tension with the anguish that is to come. We'll keep walking with Jesus this week, and we'll reach the holy moment of Jesus's last meal with his friends. We'll pause in that holy moment on Thursday when we share in the Eucharist, and when we remember Jesus washing the disciples' feet. We'll pause in the holy moment of Gethsemane, feeling the betrayal, disappointment, fear. On Friday we'll enter into the crisis of Jesus's crucifixion – those moments of

suffering, death, burial. On Saturday we'll relive the holy moment of the empty tomb, where void and emptiness becomes potential and possibility. And, next Sunday we'll celebrate that blessed holy moment of the Resurrection. A holy moment that infuses all our moments.

We began our service with the Liturgy of the Palms. We're reminded of the shape that celebration and praise give to our lives. We're also reminded of the tension underneath that celebration and praise. Life was full of conflict and injustice that day in the year 30 or so as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Conflict and injustice ripple under those shouts of praise. Conflict and injustice continue to ripple in Jerusalem, and throughout our world, still, today.

In their book "The Last Week" John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg highlight that history shows there were two processions that day as crowds made their way to Jerusalem for the week of Passover. One was a peasant procession, led by Jesus, proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The other was an imperial procession, proclaiming the power of empire.

Today, our cries of "Blessed is he", and of "All glory, laud and honour" invite us to ask ourselves which parade we are in as we cross that threshold at the gates to Jerusalem.

All of the holy moments of this Holy Week are thresholds. Doorways. Entry ways. Will we enter through the doorway that Jesus holds open, a doorway to non-violent resistance? A doorway that invites us to see, and align ourselves with the power of love? Or are we in the procession that is fueled, energized, driven, by the love of power and control?

The passage we heard from the Letter to the Philippians contrasts Christ and Caesar. It gives us two very different versions of power and success. Both are rulers. One rules by coercion, while the other rules by love. Caesar is exalted above us; Christ is one of us. Bowing before Caesar is motivated by fear; bowing before Christ is motivated by love. When we look at our world today, how much of what we see is motivated by fear?

Glory and praise are ringing out all around us. Holy moments are everywhere, all the time. Will we join our voices with that cosmic praise that sings in all of creation? Will we let that glory and praise be our impetus to then cry out against the injustices in this world? I pray that we will.

Jesus's ministry has been described as cruciform in shape. He is drawn toward Jerusalem, to the cross. Some see this as predestined: Jesus, born to die, to redeem us. I see the shape of the cross come out of Jesus's choice to continue toward Jerusalem. The shape of the cross is made as Jesus continues that long straight path to Calvary, and as he stretches out his arms to keep his followers with him. He stretches out his arms in love, drawing us in to relationship with God. Saying stay with me. Refusing to flee to the hills to live as a rabbi, where he would have made a difference locally, but not in the unfolding of human history. Maintaining his integrity to God's vision of love.

Holy Week encompasses and offers us reminders of all the holy moments of this life from celebration to lament, from joy to sorrow, from solidarity to betrayal. Those holy moments are *all* thresholds, doorways, to God. When we enter a doorway of celebration and praise and jubilation, God is there with us. When we find ourselves at a threshold of betrayal, God is with us. Sadness, joy, God is with us in all of it. Jesus's path, his arms spread wide, that cruciform shape, lets us know that God is with us.

We share in a holy moment of praise, and jubilation as we recall the story of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. We, on this side of the Resurrection know where this is going. We know that this story is shaped not only by praise and jubilation, but also by betrayal and suffering. All of these holy moments stretch high and low, far and wide, and this also offers us a cruciform shape. God, with us, in all our moments, stretches up, down and out.

In the midst of these holy moments that we pause in as we make our way through this week, we are invited to think about this cruciform shape in our lives. We are invited to think about what the cross means, how it shapes our lives, our journey as Christians. For some, the cross represents God's victory over the power of death. For others, Jesus's passion pays the price for sin once and for all, liberating us from guilt and shame. Others see Jesus's suffering as a message of God's solidarity with all who suffer. Still others see the redemption and transformation of the worst thing in the world (the Roman cross) into the best (the Tree of Life) as a message of God's intention to redeem all of creation. The cross has been described as an architecture with many entrances, and to deny this is to deny the

richness of God's grace. Just as our life is full of holy moments that are thresholds, doorways to God, so is the cross.

Holy moments. Doorways – thresholds to God, with us – and a cross with many entrances. May this be a reminder to us as we walk with Jesus this Holy Week. May that cruciform shape point us to the range of holy moments in this week. May we pause in each one, knowing that God is with us, in life, in death, in joy, in sorrow, and in all our holy moments. In Jesus name. Amen.