

Sermon

The Sunday of the Passion with the Liturgy of the Palms

March 24th, 2024

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: John 12:12-16; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 15:1-39

Last year as I stood here on this Palm/Passion Sunday, I spoke about *holy moments*: moments of jubilation and joy, of intense celebration and praise. Moments of fear and worry, longing and wondering. Moments when sadness is gradually infused with hope. Our lives are full of holy moments, and each year, Holy Week – as we walk with Jesus through the last week of his life – offers us a range of holy moments.

This year, it's not the idea of holy *moment*, but holy *movement* I offer. As I noted in the newsletter, there is a choreography to Holy Week that gives us an opportunity to practice a sacred rhythm that pulses through our spiritual lives. It's a rhythm of death, burial and resurrection. How does the movement and rhythm of Holy Week invite us to think about how we move through our lives? What are the rhythms, movements, actions that shape us in our humanity? What are the rhythms, movements and actions that influence our relationship with God, with each other, and with our world. Holy Week shows us that there is a rhythm of death, burial and resurrection and there is a rhythm of love beating through all of creation. We're invited to "tap into" this as we journey through life. We're invited to experience it – to feel it more intensely – in this week, so that we might remember it in all our weeks.

We begin Holy Week – we began our service today – hearing about Jesus entering Jerusalem. Close your eyes, and imagine the rhythm, the hum, of that procession. Feel the celebration. The jubilation. Yet, there is underlying tension rippling below the surface of those cries of "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord..." in that triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Just as Jesus knew what Jerusalem meant for him, we know too, and we heard what Jerusalem means for Jesus 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.

The throngs of people waving palm branches thought that they were feeling a rhythm of triumph, of confrontation and victory for Jesus and for them by association. They thought they were feeling a rhythm of power: power that would meet the power of Roman domination with greater force. That's not the rhythm that Jesus embodied. That's not the beat he walked to as he made his way to Jerusalem. I talked about the martial art of judo a couple of weeks ago. Judo means a gentle way. Jesus walked a gentle way. Jesus walked to the rhythm of the power of love, not the pulse of the love of power. Jesus has peace pulsing through his veins, and he walked a path of peace and non-violent resistance. Jesus didn't meet violence with violence. In Jesus, God said "stop" to violence. God said "stop" to revenge. God said "stop" to fear-based reaction and retaliation. What happened with that "stop"? The force of that violence against Jesus crushed him. It nailed him to the cross. But we know, on this side of the Resurrection, that this was not the end. God showed us, in Jesus, that what looks like death can be transformation. This infuses all of life with potential and possibility. It reminds us that a pulse, a rhythm of love beats through all of creation. We are invited to hear it, to feel it, and to match this rhythm with our lives.

The passage we heard from the Letter to the Philippians contrasts Christ and Caesar. It gives us two very different rhythms 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? We are invited, in Christ, to have love as our impetus, as our motivator, and to trust that a rhythm of love is stronger than violence, stronger than fear, stronger than death. In that trust, we can say "stop", we can say "no", to violence. We can say stop to oppression and injustice.

Holy Week offers us other rhythms and movement that we're invited to let shape our lives. We move from the pulse of palms and power to Maundy Thursday. As fear and conflict bubbled under the surface in Jerusalem, Jesus shared a meal with those who loved him. He gave them a new commandment: to love. He washed their feet in an act of love and service. In the midst of turmoil, knowing that more turmoil and anguish was to come, Jesus and the disciples immersed themselves in a rhythm of love and community. We are invited to do the same thing when we gather as a community. Our liturgy invites us into movement and rhythm. We are invited to feel a counter-rhythm to the world's rhythm as we

worship, so that we can walk to a different beat out in the world – so that we can walk to a beat, to a rhythm of love. Feel that this morning in our songs and prayers. Taste it in bread and wine.

There is more rhythm and movement in Holy Week: the darkness of Gethsemane, the rumble of betrayal, disappointment and fear. Then the cadence of crisis in Jesus's crucifixion: suffering, death, and burial reverberate and destabilize. On Saturday we reflect on the empty tomb. We feel an absence of rhythm, an emptiness, and a silence. If we listen, though, the heartbeat of God is there! This reminds us that in all the rhythm and movement of life, God is there. God shows us in Jesus that a rhythm of love continues to beat, no matter what, and we are invited to listen and align ourselves with that rhythm.

With the cross, God changed everything. God showed us that death isn't the worst that can happen to us. God showed us that sometimes what looks and feels like death can be change and transformation. God showed us that there is a counter-rhythm to the rhythm of violence and injustice in our world. It's a rhythm of love, and that rhythm is stronger than anything.

Trusting this means that we can move with all of life's rhythms. We can sit with the unknown, with the unanswerable. We can wait in what looks like wreckage. We can live with silence because we know that the heartbeat of God continues to beat, in us and in all of creation.

Holy Week shows us that there is a rhythm of death, burial and resurrection and there is a rhythm of love beating through all of creation. We're invited to "tap into" this as we journey through life. We're invited to embody it, to let it show forth in our lives. I invite you to feel all the sacred rhythms of this week fully, deeply, and remember that in all the rhythms of life – in all the dying and rising, in all the change and transformation – God is with us, inviting us to beat a rhythm of love, on a path of love, in Jesus name. Amen.