

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020
Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11
The Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Sermon:
“Completely surrounded, but all alone.”

I am certain that I am not the only one who feels a bit off kilter this Palm Sunday. This is not the way this day is supposed to go! We are supposed to be together, waving our palms and shouting our praises. We are supposed to be getting ready for Woodlawn’s Easter Egg Hunt, a huge community celebration with candy and laughing children and an over-heated Easter bunny. We are supposed to be getting ourselves ready for Easter.

Palm Sunday is supposed to be a day of levity and festive brightness. Having slogged our way through Lent, Palm Sunday worship begins with the stirrings of spring. We brighten our pace a bit and put aside Lent’s darkness. We shout our Hosannas and wave our palm branches – we smile as some kids instinctively begin folding their palms fronds into crosses, and we don’t even flinch when the other kids turn theirs into swords and weapons. Rejoice, sing and shout aloud: it is Palm Sunday, and our king comes to us.

But how do you have a parade in a time of social distancing?

If you’re feeling off kilter, then perhaps it may be helpful to go back and spend some time reading Matthew’s story of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem. Watch as this carefully choreographed drama unfolds. Jesus directs the entire event, sending two disciples into town with specific instructions on where to find not just one animal, but two.

And that is the last thing that Jesus says until the entrance of over. The camera pulls back to show a crowd gathering, spreading their coats, and cutting palm leaves. They roll out the red carpet.

But Jesus never says a word.

He rides silently, his eyes focused on the city and the events that he knows lie ahead. There is so much he wants to say and do, yet that will come later. In our coronavirus isolation, we understand that feeling. We understand that Jesus is surrounded by crowds, but is also fundamentally all alone.

Jesus remains isolated, and Matthew spells it out what that means.

Matthew understands that triumphant entrances into Jerusalem were not uncommon in Jesus’ day. They marked great political and military achievements, and celebrated victories over enemies. But as the crowd whoops and hollers and carries on, Jesus makes it clear that his entrance is no ordinary parade. He comes astride an every day beast of burden, not a victor’s

stallion. He enters not with a flank of soldiers, but with a rag tag group of disciples whose clay feet are just beginning to show.

Matthew indeed points to Jesus as the coming king, but he instead of waving flags in celebration of military victory, this king comes to serve.

He is the one that we need.

He is all alone, even though he is surrounded by a crowd.

He comes, not to overthrow the king, but to be crucified.

He comes, not to take Herod's throne, but to become the servant of all.

He comes as God with us, Emmanuel who will embrace the sting of death and know the struggles of isolation.

At this moment, our loud Hosannas really do mean, "he saves."

This is the sort of parade we need this year. We need the assurance of God who comes to us in our worries and fears, the promise of Christ who experienced loneliness and rejection. We need the comfort of our faith that reminds us that we are always connected to God and each other. We need the reminder that God is with us, and that even in isolation, we are not alone. This is exactly the sort of reminder we need.

We need the reminder that even though the church is scattered, we are still one church.

Covid-19 has struck at a time when more of us are living alone than anytime in history. Journalist Robin Wright notes that the numbers of Americans living alone has nearly doubled over the past 50 years. She writes, "as the new pathogen forces us to socially distance, I have begun to feel lonely. I miss the ability to see, converse with, hug, or spend time with friends. Life seems shallower, more like survival than living."

For those numbed by isolation, and for those who feel as though surviving is the best you can do, Jesus comes. He enters Jerusalem to embody what he has taught: that the greatest of all shall be the servant of all.

That is our promise today.

Many of you know Rich and Mary Voth's daughter Bronwyn. The other day Bronwyn posted a beautiful reflection on Facebook, and she gave me permission to share it with you. In the middle of a quiet day, she suddenly heard cars driving around her block, honking horns and making a lot of noise. Bronwyn said she felt annoyed by the ruckus. "Is now really the time for this disturbance?" she reflected. "There are serious things going on."

But then she steps out on her front porch. "When the cars pass my house, I see that they are festooned with Happy Birthday signs. My annoyance drops away. These people have

made a parade because it's someone's birthday and they can't go near each other to celebrate. My eyes well up with tears." Now is exactly the time for this," she says.

Standing on her porch, watching the parade of cars pass by with their signs, Bronwyn suddenly knows that all they are trying to do is make a "person feel special in a world turned sideways." She continues, "For the past few weeks, I've been in "business" mode. I have responded to my fear with vigilance and planning. Lived largely from the neck up. Sure, I've felt anger and powerlessness. I've been fidgety and forgetful. But I haven't really felt the sadness. I haven't been able to cry. For this moment, though, the tears are breaking through. And I'm grateful for this connection to my own heart. I'm grateful for this ruckus. Now is exactly the time for this."

Indeed. Now is exactly the time for a parade like this. Wave your palms, shout your hosannas, and know that our God comes to us -- in our pain, our worries, fears, and isolation. Amen.