

Palm Sunday A April 5, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Matthew 21:1-11

Inner Journey
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

How can you go on a journey when you can't leave the place where you are?

Every year on Palm Sunday, you hear me preach or perhaps read somewhere that today is the beginning of Holy Week, the most important week in the Church Year. It is a week that is very much like a journey in that we follow the events of the last days of Jesus' life, his death and burial, and of course his resurrection. We follow these events by participating in very special and some very old liturgies. Some of these liturgies were modeled after liturgies in churches located in specific places in the Holy Land that correspond with the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. For example, the Great Vigil of Easter is one of the oldest liturgies in the Church, and much of what we do in that liturgy even here in modern day Athens, Ohio has not changed much from the earliest days of the Church.

These Holy Week liturgies, including today's liturgy that usually begins with blessing palm branches and processing into the church building, have a special intention. Not to irritate folks because they are so different from our usual Sunday worship services, or make people fret about the weather. They are intended to help Christians who could not go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land during Holy Week have the same or similar liturgical experiences. We may not be able to dirty our feet on the same dusty roads Jesus walked, or throw palm branches at the same place Jesus entered Jerusalem, but we can have a similar liturgical experiences with other Christians and through that communal and liturgical experience find ourselves connected with Christians all around the world.

That is one reason why not being able to gather in person for Holy Week will be painful for some of us. We are cognizant of our connection to the Body of Christ through those liturgies, as well as feeling closer to Jesus and his journey that brings us deep into God's redemption and new life. But just as the Church once figured out there is more than one way to make a journey when Holy Week liturgies were created, we now have the opportunity to consider how we can make that journey without leaving our homes. Because like it or not, whether or not it feels like Holy Week to us as we deal with ever changing circumstances around us, today is still Palm Sunday, and this week is still an opportunity, as it always has been and will be, to step aside from the frenzied demands of whatever times we are in to walk with Jesus during this remarkable week.

It's an important journey. One scholar and New Testament professor N.T. Wright says is also challenging because it asks us to "hear the story of the pain of the world, of our world." But perhaps during a time when we may be heightened in our awareness of pain, the pain of job losses, the pain of insecurities, the pain of wondering if we are as "essential" to society as we thought, the pain of illness and the pain of losing loved ones or friends, even the pain of losing some of our freedom and autonomy, perhaps now is the best time to take the walk of Holy Week with Jesus.

One way of going on a journey without ever leaving home is through the invitation of the written word. I suppose that might sound a little (or a lot) ludicrous during the height of social media, when everything seems to be live-steaming or video recorded and put on Facebook or You Tube for all the world to see. But hear (or in this case read) me out. I have been to many places I could never go in person by reading about them. That is how I have been to C. S. Lewis's Narnia many, many times. And to Tolkien's Middle Earth and walked the magical halls of J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts School of Wizardry. Through those authors written worlds I have been able to travel to impossible places and return renewed, comforted, strengthened, and better for the journey.

The written word has taken me to places that once existed but are no longer. Edward Abby took me for a canoe ride down a river in a canyon now under water because of a dam that powers cities in the western part of the country. Farley Mowat introduced me to people who are long gone and wrote gripping descriptions of places that have changed so much if I were able to travel there in person today, I am sure I would not recognize them.

Whether real or imagined, writers have taken me to times and places that have had an impact on my life mostly by making me feel connected to the people and the places they wrote about. That is the power writers have, and it is something that we might need right now. Because it is that same power the author of the Gospels harnessed to show us Jesus, his life, his death, and his resurrection. By reading the Gospels, slowly, deliberately, meditatively we can make the journey with Jesus this Holy Week.

This may not be an exciting trip with all the adventures of travel. And for certain it is not the same as being there in person. I would not dare argue otherwise. But there is something to be said for the inner journey; the one that we take with our hearts and minds and souls when our bodies can't make the trip. It won't be the same as actually visiting the Holy Land, and it won't be the same as participating in the beautiful liturgies of Holy Week, but it might lead us into an aspect of the Love of God we hadn't noticed before, and lead to new connections.

If we look at Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem without the distraction of standing outside in the weather worrying about how we are going to bless the palm branches or how we are going to get into the church building or wondering how much longer before we can sit down, perhaps some of the details of the story would stand out in a new way.

We have probably heard before Jesus' entry in Jerusalem that day was full of religious and political and Biblical symbolic meaning. The donkey and colt were references to prophecies that signaled the Messiah was arriving, and salvation for the people of Israel was dawning. The people responded to this symbolism with a tremendous welcome for Jesus with symbolism of their own. They welcomed him with shouts of hope. They welcomed him with branches thrown on the ground. And they welcomed him with their clothing.

Today's Gospel for the Liturgy of the Palms says that the people spread their cloaks on the ground for the donkey and colt Jesus was riding to walk on. That's quite a strong welcome, especially if we wonder how many of those people had more than one cloak. Throwing cloaks on the ground was a very powerful gesture. In 2 Kings 9:13 we read spreading your cloak on the ground for someone else to walk on was a symbol of loyalty. This means the people who welcomed Jesus by spreading their cloaks on the ground were stating they were loyal to him, not any empire. It was a dangerous thing to do in a time when the Roman Empire could call such behavior traitorous.

Perhaps the people of the time were so tired of Roman oppression and were so deeply longing for release and relief, when they saw the symbols of royalty and liberation surrounding Jesus as he entered Jerusalem they got all caught up in the excitement and couldn't help letting their hopes out. So, they spread their cloaks on the ground as a sign of loyalty to the person they hoped would be able to do something about their fears and frustrations and sorrows of the time. As we know, they didn't hang in there with Jesus for very long.

Dealing with disappointment in saviors is part of the journey of Holy Week too, but we'll deal with it later in the week. Today, it is enough to focus on the welcome and the symbols of the day. Since we can't go to Jerusalem today, we can't even go into our own church building, let's consider how we can welcome Jesus into the place where we are right now. How can we welcome Jesus into our homes?

One idea circulating around social media right now is to put green branches or leaves of some sort on the front door of our homes because we are not allowed to bless and distribute the palm branches like we always do out of concern of unintentionally spreading covid-19. These branches take the place of traditional palms and are a sign of who we welcome and the week is beginning. They can also serve as a symbol of community and connection if we happen to see similar branches on the

front doors of other people's homes. If you do put green branches on your door, please take a picture and email it to Ted Foster our webmaster who will share these pictures on the Church's website (chogs.org) and Facebook page.

Another way to welcome Jesus into your home is to create space for prayer and reflection. There was an old tradition of making "home altars" that served as places of prayer and worship for families and individuals when they were not able to attend church services in person. Look around your home for symbols of how you might welcome Jesus, maybe symbols from the Gospel or just things you associate with welcome and place them on your home altar, whether it's a table, mantle, shelf, or corner of a desk or table. I'll be sharing my home altar and suggestions for how to use yours during Holy Week throughout the week. These are a few ways we can make the journey of Holy Week together. Even though this year's Holy Week will be more of an inward journey, I want you to know I am still with you on this journey. We may be separated but we aren't alone. My hope and my prayer is that by taking on the Holy Week journey in this new way you will still find connection with Christ, with each other, and with me. This connection is the stuff of the Holy Spirit and can sustain and carry us through this week, into what comes next and is one of the things we will celebrate when we can gather together again.

Today we begin the journey of Holy Week by welcoming Jesus. Will you join me?