

PALM / PASSION SUNDAY, April 5, 2020

SCENE One: *The First Palm Sunday*

During this season of Lent, our imaginations have been getting a workout as we've joined Abram and Sarai as they set out from Haran for the land God would show them; as we followed Moses and some runaway Hebrew slaves into the wilderness; as we walked with Ezekiel through that valley of dry bones. Today, we are in a very different landscape. No more dry, barren wilderness; we are approaching the city of Jerusalem. Today, we are not with people on a journey, but with pilgrims who have reached their destination. They are Jews from all around the Mediterranean basin, who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover, that festival recalling the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

Jerusalem – “Yerushalim sel zahav” – “Jerusalem, the Golden”, built on hills, its walls made of honey coloured stone, its impressive gates through which crowds stream, all heading towards one place – the temple. Jerusalem where Roman troops are based in the Antonia Fortress, armed and ready to put down any rebellion - real or perceived - against the Emperor and his local minion, Governor Pontius Pilate. Imagine the people walking along the cobblestoned streets. The colours and variety of dress. The babble of languages - Latin, Greek, Aramaic. The aroma of spices, of bread baking, of lamb roasting.

As Jesus and his disciples stand on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gives these instructions to two of his disciples: “Go into the village ahead of you. Immediately, you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say: ‘the Lord needs them’, and he will send them

immediately.” Now, a donkey is not exactly a large or impressive animal. A Roman soldier wouldn’t be caught dead riding on a donkey. He’s be on the back of a magnificent charger or driving a chariot. Donkeys are for the poor, the unimportant, for people like the heavily pregnant Mary en route to Bethlehem. Donkeys are definitely not associated with war so when a Hebrew prophet named Zechariah talks about a different kind of king, one who is humble and coming in peace, he describes him as mounted on a donkey.

Jesus is mounted on a donkey when he and his disciples start down the Mount of Olives towards a gate into Jerusalem. As the procession approaches, some people spread their cloaks on the road to make a soft and easy path for Jesus. People wave their palm branches and shout “hosanna”, “hosanna to the Son of David.” The word “hosanna” which is frequently on the lips of psalmists means “save” or “help”. Now, there is a word that might come easily to our lips in this time of pandemic as our lives are turned upside down, and what were normal activities just a few weeks ago are no longer possible; as the situation keeps shifting; as no one can say how long this crisis and these requirements for physical distancing and self-isolation will continue. We may like to think we are in control of our lives: we make decisions; we set our course. But the spread of COVID-19 around the globe has revealed just how false this assumption is. Despite all of our technology and advances in science and health care, we are not in charge. As Richard Rohr, founder of the Centre for Action and Contemplation observed in one of his daily meditations: “For many of us, this may be the first time in our lives that we have felt so little control over our own destiny and the destiny of those we love. This lack of control initially feels like a loss, a humiliation, a stepping backward, an

undesired vulnerability. However, recognizing our lack of control is a universal starting point for a serious spiritual walk towards wisdom and truth.”

SCENE TWO: *Cleansing of the Temple*

Narrow, cobblestoned streets now strewn with palm branches. Cries of “hosanna” echoing in the air. A man on donkey. A prophet from Galilee. Hailed as the Son of David. Greeted as royalty, as the one who will save his people from the oppressive yoke of the Roman Empire. Now, on foot, Jesus climbs the steep path up to the temple. Great blocks of white marble sparkle in the bright sunlight. The gold and silver trim glistens. The temple with its various courts – the outer court of the Gentiles for tourists who come to gawk, the court of women, the court of men where only Jewish males may enter, and the inner Holy of Holies, the territory of priests alone. The temple with its altar on which sacrifices are burned to thank God for blessings like the birth of a child, and to express regret for hurtful words and actions. What a contrast in size and splendour to the little synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus learned to read, and where he studied scripture and gathered with the men for prayer.

Even on the Sabbath, a day of worship, this temple bears little resemblance to our sanctuary. There are no pews: people are moving about and engaging in all sorts of activities. There is no quiet, let alone silence: people are talking, shouting, calling out to one another. And sitting behind their tables, moneychangers are doing a brisk business. Since the temple is holy ground, coins bearing the likeness of the emperor who claims to be a god cannot be brought into this space. Roman money has to be exchanged for temple currency. Of course, a fee has to be exacted for this service. Our banks are not the first to dream up that idea! And over there, perched on stools, are the sellers of

pigeons and doves and sheep. The temple is sort of like those movie theatres and coffee shops that have signs saying: “no outside food or drink”. People are not allowed to bring their own animals for sacrifice.

Jesus stands quietly observing the scene. Does he see how few coins are given in exchange for the unacceptable ones? Does he notice the individuals who turn sadly away. In this barter economy where labour is usually exchanged for food and shelter, they simply do not have any money - not even the few coins needed to purchase a lowly pigeon. They are effectively excluded from practising their religion. Does Jesus hear the voices raised in hawking wares and haggling over prices?

Without warning, without saying a word, Jesus starts flipping over the tables of the moneychangers. The coins are clattering on the stone pavement. As they start to roll away, the moneychangers are diving after them. Now, Jesus is opening the cages with the doves and the pens with the sheep. There are birds flying and animals escaping. Who would have thought anyone would behave in this way in such a holy site! Who would have thought that anyone would dare to challenge the authority of the religious leaders right here in the very place where they meet as a Council. Let alone, a lone individual, a wandering teacher and healer from a backwater region like Galilee!

Amidst this bedlam, Jesus is speaking: “my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves.” Jesus may be quoting the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, but the anger in his voice is palpable. Is there a place for anger - that emotion which is so often denied or repressed? Anger over injustice or exclusion. What about people who are homeless - how can they self-isolate; how can they rest and recuperate if they become ill? Anger that calls those in authority to account. COVID-19

is a global pandemic. We are all in this together. So why are some political leaders acting as if it is only their own people who matter and taking steps to stop the flow of scarce resources to others?

SCENE THREE: *Curing in the Temple*

Jesus' anger has sent the moneychangers' scrambling, and the pigeon sellers' fleeing. But look, not everyone is running away, There is a stream of people making their way towards Jesus determined to reach him. People searching for healing for their diseases, seeking wholeness for broken lives. Jesus stretches out his hand. Jesus touches them, restoring fullness of life to men, woman and children. Ah, who can forget the children? Children who cannot sit still. Children who haven't learned they are supposed to be seen and not heard. Children who are not intimidated by the holiness of the space. Just look at them racing around. Just listen to them joyfully shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David"

The priests in their long robes and all their great dignity protest: this behaviour is not seemly. The scribes object: "Son of David" is much too exalted a title for a simple healer from Galilee. But Jesus does nothing to still or silence the children. On the contrary, he commends them, quoting a psalm: "out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies, you have prepared praise for yourself."

These children are leading the way. Are there times when our children, our youth lead the way? When they ask questions of our Prime Minister around COVID-19. When they courageously take on herculean tasks like stopping child labour around the world. When they insist that their elders need to address the crisis of climate change.

SCENE FOUR *Weeping Over Jerusalem*

A new day has dawned. Jesus has set out from the home of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He has left his refuge in Bethany - the one place where he can relax away from the crowds and the critics. He is once more standing on the Mount of Olives, looking out over Jerusalem. Jerusalem, established by King David as his capital. The place where Solomon built the first temple. The city mourned by exiles who through tears proclaimed: "if ever I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither." The place to which the exiles returned to rebuild and re-establish. Today's conflicted city, holy to three religious traditions. Seers dream of a Jerusalem transformed - a holy city with the river of life flowing from the throne of God.

Jesus says: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem." Is it my imagination or is there a catch in Jesus' voice? "The city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." Like a mother bird with her wings outstretched, Jesus' arms open wide - open wide to welcome, accept, embrace. "But you were not willing." Slowly, his arms drop. Tears slide down his cheeks. It is painful when a gift of love is ignored or rejected. It is hard when an offer of support or protection is spurned. How frustrating to try for three years to reach people through stories and teaching, through acts of compassion and deeds that challenge accepted wisdom and realize that even your closest, dearest companions still don't really understand who you are or what you are about. It is hard to stand by and watch people you love carry on down a path that will lead them away from the fullness of life you so earnestly want for them.

SCENE FIVE *Betrayal*

The chief priests and the elders have been conspiring and plotting how to arrest Jesus. They have heard the crowds' greeting his arrival with joyful shouts of "hosanna". They have seen the wounded and the ill flocking to him for healing. Indeed, Jesus' very popularity makes them all the more determined to eliminate him. But how to do this without provoking a riot? They need a secluded place and a time when there are no throngs around Jesus.

Along comes Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples Jesus has chosen, led and taught. He approaches the chief priest with a question: "What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you?" This is exactly what the religious authorities have been looking for. They pay Judas thirty pieces of silver. From that moment, Judas is on the alert, looking for the right opportunity to betray his friend.