

In a time of social distancing it is hard to imagine being part of a parade this morning, and yet that is exactly what our Scripture from Matthew calls us to do. On this morning we remember with tangible excitement the way the people felt when they heard Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They would finally see with their own eyes the King that was coming to save them.

Palm Sunday is a day that brings us together as the community of Christ. This is a day of joy, and this year we need it now more than ever. Christ is still coming to Jerusalem to save us.

This week all over the United States creative parades have been taking place. Instead of crowds lining the streets and multicolored floats, teachers and school staff members have lined up in their cars to drive by the homes of their students. As they drive by the students wait with anticipation to see their teachers and wave from their yards or front doors. The teachers held up signs that said, “I miss you.” The purpose of these parades in the words of one teacher was to show the students that “We are not leaving them behind just because [they] are not at the seats in our school.”ⁱ

The teachers wanted to show their students they cared about them. They knew many students were down and sad about not going back to school for the rest of the year. They knew many parents were overwhelmed trying to homeschool for the first time. These parades brought hope, joy, and comfort to those who took part in them as well as those who saw them go by.

Even for only a moment, these parades took us away from the serious reality of the pandemic we are facing. So many things have been cancelled and lost. People have lost their jobs, graduations and weddings have been cancelled, family gatherings and events are postponed.

But the good news for our lives today is in a time where everything has been cancelled, Christ’s love for us remains, if only we follow Jesus Christ to the cross.

Today we start a journey as we follow Jesus Christ to the cross. We begin here at this joyful parade, but we know the rest of the week will be harder as Jesus’ walks to the cross bearing the sins of the world on his shoulders.

So, we relish in this day of joy. This day where people recognized Christ for who he is, the king of our lives. They kept calling out to him Hosanna which means, “Save us!”ⁱⁱ

During that time the people of Jerusalem desperately wanted to be saved from the “crushing imperial rule.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Before Jesus rode into town on a donkey, another man rode into town on a war horse. Commentary tells us: “As Roman imperialism crushed and oppressed God’s people, Pilate made the trip into town to uphold law and order. Pilate must have entered the city in a procession of pomp complete with war horses and an armored army.”^{iv}

The people of Jerusalem probably did not celebrate this parade. They may have been interested to see it take place, but the feeling they were left with after the parade would be fear and not excitement. This was an officer of the law they had to follow, whether they wanted to or not or there would be extreme consequences.

While it was probably impressive to witness Pilate’s entrance into town with his armed guards, beautiful horses, and decorated vestments, the people did not celebrate his entrance into town. Pilate was comfortable riding a war horse as he had been a knight before he was elected to hold a government role.^v He probably walked through the streets head held high, back straight projecting an image of authority as he looked down on the people.

When Jesus came into town, the people of Jerusalem recognized Jesus Christ as king. They were not frightened by his presence, but excited that the promised Messiah was coming to save them. All along the way in this parade process, Jesus’ disciples were reciting his many amazing deeds and miracles, just in case people did not know who he was. Jesus did not come into town proud and arrogant like Pilate.

He came into town as a humble servant. He was unarmed, he did not have beautiful vestments, but he had come to be among the people and show them that the Son of God was with them. Jesus entry marks one week from his resurrection, and this is why Palm Sunday kicks off Holy Week. It is the marking of the trajectory that Jesus is taking from Jerusalem, to the cross, to the tomb and beyond.

The people responded by offering what they had to Jesus. They didn’t offer him gold or money, they laid down their clothes to make a pathway for him, they picked palms off the trees and waved them.

In the people’s actions of waving palms, we see the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus Christ from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, we learn that palm branches symbolized “goodness, well-being, and victory. They were often depicted on coins and important buildings. King Solomon had palm branches carved into the walls and doors of the temple: "On the walls all around the temple, in both the inner and outer rooms, he carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers" (1 Kings 6:29).^{vi}

We also see that palm branches are mentioned in the book of Revelations. In Revelation 7:9 the Bible reads: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."

It was important that palm branches were used on this important day, because this action signified that the people recognized Jesus as a king who was coming to save them.

So today we too wave our palm branches or cross. If you have any of these items I do invite you to hold them up now. These palms are a symbol of our hope that Christ will continue to save us.

Today we ask that Christ would save us from the corona virus and not only us, but the world. We grieve the many lives that have already been lost to this horrible virus.

The danger for us as a people of faith during this pandemic is that we would turn insular. That we start worrying only about ourselves and those we love. But even during this pandemic there is a great opportunity for the people of God.

Now more than ever people need the good news of Jesus Christ. How are we proclaiming this truth during these uncertain times?

The truth is we do have a way forward in these difficult times, our way is Jesus Christ.

In John 14:6 Jesus tells the disciples: “I am the way, the truth, and the life...” Jesus wanted to encourage the disciples to continue to follow his teaching after he died and was resurrected from the dead.

He wanted them to know that no matter what happened in their lives, no matter what kind of persecution they were facing, through their faith in Him, they would find eternal life.

In the book “The God We Can Know” by Rob Fuquay, Fuquay shares how we can continue to follow Jesus Christ forward in our lives.

1) Stay connected with Christ and the body of Christ.^{vii}

We can continue to embody the love of God when we abide and Christ and feel the strength of the body of Christ.

We are not alone, God is with us, but we must strive to remain connected to God in this isolating time. Join in the prayer call each week on Wednesday at noon, or you can take that time to pray individually to God.

2) Practice sacrifice.^{viii}

All throughout the season of Lent we have been practicing sacrifice. Whether we have given up something we really enjoy, or whether we have taking on a new spiritual practice, we have devoted this time to God to reflect upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. This is a practice than we can continue beyond Lent.

We are called to sacrifice our lives for God so that others may come to experience a relationship with God. One way we can practice sacrifice right now is how we share our resources with our neighbors. If you have something you can share, please drop it off at the Food Bank and they will bring it to people in our community who are in need.

3) Continue to practice compassion.^{ix}

We show people that Christ is the way forward during this time by the way we treat other people. That is our greatest witness. Rob Fuquay said: “Following Jesus made [the disciples] aware of how [Christ] noticed people that others overlooked. When you make Jesus your way, this is what happens. You become open to Jesus pointing out opportunities to extend grace to others.”^x

Now more than ever we may have some more free time on our hands, but what are we choosing to do with our time? Maybe we are taking on projects around the house that we never seen to find the time to get to.

I encourage you to use this time well and reach out to people that you have been meaning to reach out to. Write that card to a family member, friend, or community member and thank them for their presence in your life.

As you wake up each day on Holy Week ask this question posed by Rob Fuquay: “Jesus, what would you have me do today?”^{xi}

I can’t wait to hear all the ways in which God is moving in your lives during this time. Please share them with me!

As we continue our journey to the cross, may we remember that Christ leads us there and God is with us. **Even in the uncertainty of life, the good news for our lives today is Jesus is our way forward.** May we embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ today and always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.wtvr.com/news/coronavirus/teachers-parade-for-central-virginia-students-we-are-not-leaving-them-behind>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-does-hosanna-mean.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/april-14-palm-passion-sunday-year-c/palm-passion-sunday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

^{iv} <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/april-14-palm-passion-sunday-year-c/palm-passion-sunday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

^v <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate>

^{vi} <https://www.thoughtco.com/palm-branches-bible-story-summary-701202>

^{vii} Rob Fuquay. “The God We Can Know.” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 95.

^{viii} Ibid. P. 96.

^{ix} Ibid. P. 97.

^x Ibid, P. 97.

^{xi} Ibid. P. 101.