



DO NOT LOSE A SINGLE ONE

March 25, 2018, Palm Sunday

John 12:12-16; 13:21-27, 33-38; 18:1-11, 15-18, 25-27

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For Christians, Holy Week begins on a high note of celebration. All four of the Gospels record Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with shouts from the crowds of "Hosanna!" The Gospel According to John offers a few details that the other Gospels do not contain. John's unique story-telling will continue as Holy Week unfolds, offering whole chapters filled with long speeches and prayers by Jesus that Matthew, Mark and Luke do not tell at all. In the three synoptic gospels (meaning their eyewitness accounts are similar), Jesus gives very detailed instructions to his disciples about where they are to find the donkey, or the colt, (and in one of the Gospels a donkey *and* a colt) upon which he will ride into Jerusalem. In all three of those gospels, this will be Jesus' first and only time to enter Jerusalem. People shout out praise to the house of David, spreading leafy branches and cloaks along the way.

By John's account, this will be Jesus' fourth time in Jerusalem. And only John specifies that those leafy branches are from palm trees, which is why we wave palm fronds today instead of fig leaves, I suppose. Only in John do the great crowds welcome Jesus explicitly because they saw him raise Lazarus from the dead—it is that action that inspires their praise and national fervor that the liberator and Messiah has indeed come. That same action, raising Lazarus, provoked a far different reaction among the religious authorities in John, who respond by plotting Jesus' death. In John, hopes and fears are confirmed on both sides as the great crowd hails Jesus not only as *a* king, but more to the point for the Jewish leaders and the occupying Roman forces, as "the king of Israel." What is hope for many is threat indeed to some.



Perhaps it is precisely because we know where all of this Palm Sunday celebration is headed that the church has allowed, even encouraged, Palm Sunday to become a sort of hybrid day in the church year...its designation on our Presbyterian Planning Calendar now bears the heading: Palm/Passion Sunday. We may begin with our celebratory Palm Sunday parade, waving palms, children shouting, and a triumphant choral anthem, but then the readings continue and the mood changes. The rest of the service turns toward Jesus' approaching Passion...events leading inexorably toward his arrest and suffering and death.

But I suspect there is another reason that has promoted this liturgical turn of events. A reason that is quite practical, yet no less theological for all of that.

Attendance at weekday worship services has waned for years in this country. Even in Holy Week, fewer people will attend services like Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Fewer still when these Holy days fall in the competing 'holy days' of March Break! This practical reality has theological consequences. Imagine if Christians moved seamlessly from the celebratory high of Palm Sunday directly to the higher celebration of Easter Sunday. We move uninterrupted from triumph to triumph: from palms greening with life to pungent lilies dressed in resurrection white, as if the Christian life were all hosannas and alleluias and trumpets and major chords.

While such a theology may be popular, and indeed some churches don't even want something as unpleasant as a cross in their 'worship centers,' those who promote it peddle a false theology. Our lives simply do not bear witness to this life as one triumph after another. Doug, Rebekah and I realized this past week that we are all reading the same book. Written by Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, she and her husband have a young son. Kate was diagnosed recently at thirty-five with Stage 4 cancer. The book is her honest account of her experiences so far. She writes:

I've been in treatment for five months, and now it is Palm Sunday. When we get to church, the Sunday School is closed so we are faced with the terror of



having a two-year old in the main Sunday service. The sanctuary is swimming with children. They spin in circles, they climb on top of each other, but mostly they hit each other with palm fronds. In Christian art, a palm frond is a symbol of martyrdom, a little reminder to the viewer that this saint has earned his or her status in blood. But at every Palm Sunday service, the only whiff of martyrdom is the sense that every child is about three seconds away from getting a palm frond in the eyeball. A tired volunteer still manages a smile and hands one to my two-year old, who is delighted.

Suddenly, the organ music swells and the doors fly open, and the procession has begun. It is, as all children's programming is, completely absurd and wonderful.

Kate takes her son, Zach, forward with other parents and children in the sanctuary and he is mesmerized by everything he sees—the vaulted ceilings, wooden beams, and window after window of colored glass.

Everyone is smiling broadly, Kate continues, ...So taken are we by the spectacle of radiant youth that nobody is looking at the hymnal...I hold Zach up a little higher so he can wave his frond in the air, and I try to smile as a few tears trickle down my cheeks. I know where Palm Sunday falls in the story of our God. Jesus is on a donkey trudging into Jerusalem, people waving their arms in the air, tattered coats thrown down before the One who marches toward His death. It is a celebration. It is a funeral procession. Holding Zach in my arms, fifteen days from my next scan, I wish I knew the difference.¹

The Gospel of John tells us, in an uncharacteristically spare account of Palm Sunday, that at the time his disciples did not understand what was going on in that procession. It was only later, after Jesus' death and resurrection, that they remembered it all and saw it for what it was. A celebration. A funeral procession. It was both.



Like those first disciples, we are remembering, too, some of what happened to Jesus from Palm Sunday into Holy Week. John's Gospel spends seven chapters covering the events, so we have left out large portions of the story. Like Jesus washing his disciples' feet and praying a really long prayer because he loves his disciples so and worries about them, too. He refers to them as little children, with all that darkness looming and the cosmic battle between good and evil starting in earnest. Jesus remains the steady, faithful, non-anxious presence of God to them hour by hour. He is our steady, faithful, non-anxious presence still in the darkneses we face and the battles we must wage against illness or evil in its many personal and social guises. In chapter 13, when Satan enters Judas and directs his actions, you will notice that Satan never makes a move without Jesus permitting it first. There is never a question which power is greater in this world, despite evidence to the contrary.

The scripture reading today offers glimpses of those closest to Jesus. One story also tells us how Jesus responds to those who set themselves as his enemies. As we enter the Holy Week to come, we may find ourselves in this story as well.

John 13 introduces us to a disciple not mentioned earlier. Known only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," his identity is a great mystery to us, but scholars presume he may have been well known to John's original congregation. No matter how close he may have been to the heart of Jesus, it seems that he had no more insight or inside scoop than the others when it came to guessing who might betray Jesus. And there is Judas. If asked to identify the betrayer in a courtroom, we would all immediately point our fingers at Judas, the jury convicting him with no deliberation, and the death sentence handed down the same day. But here in John, Jesus does not publicly ridicule him or point an accusing finger. Instead, to this one who will betray him, Jesus responds with a gesture of hospitality and love. He breaks off a piece of bread and offers it to Judas. He does not accuse him. Jesus feeds him. There will be no grisly death for Judas in this Gospel. Even when Judas brings between 200 and 600 Roman soldiers and religious leaders to arrest him, Jesus simply identifies himself as the one they seek; asking the soldiers to let "the



rest of them go,” including Judas. It is the same for Simon Peter, who looks worse in John than in the other gospels—if that is possible. In chapter 13, Simon Peter vows to follow Jesus anywhere...even lay down his life for him. But by chapter 18, Peter has denies Jesus three times, and warms himself by the light of a fire built by guards in the courtyard of the high priest’s home. When the cock crows, John’s Gospel does not compound Simon Peter’s failure by recalling of Jesus’ earlier prediction. There is only the lone rooster’s cry, echoing into the night.

And those are Jesus’ friends. As for his enemies, John describes several hundred men snaking through the green space carrying lanterns and torches and weapons. It’s a scene we can visualize, recalling as it does the scenes from this fall in Charlottesville. “Alt-right” men, shouting anti-black and anti-Jewish phrases in the night, held aloft their blazing tiki torches. Surrounding a small band of counter-protesters who linked arms and sang, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...” In both instances, the Gospel according to John would tell us which group was more powerful than the other, despite all evidence to the contrary. Jesus responds to his enemies with calm words of truth and to his own with the command to put away weapons that hurt or kill.

Do you see how it is? Jesus has chosen fragile, failing disciples. He continues to choose us, fragile and failing though we are. Not only does Jesus choose us, he continues to send us out as his representatives in the world! Our little lights in all of that darkness. Our little songs amid all of that noise. Our little parade against all of those armed troops. Yet, he does not send us out defenseless. He arms us with a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved us. Really, it is a commandment as old as Leviticus 19:8 and Deuteronomy 6:4; what is new is that this love is shaped by his death and resurrection. Jesus gave this commandment to us because he was departing and he knew we would stay behind. So, to help us in our uncertainty, Jesus tells us to love one another.

It makes a great Christian mantra or, put more contemporaneously, a great church meme: When uncertain, love one another.



Katie Couric covered the Charlottesville protests for 72 hours. She is working on a series exploring the revolutions happening in our culture, communities and families. Her ties to UVA run deep as a graduate and also having a sister who served as a state senator in Virginia from 1996 until her death in 2006. She covered the large interfaith gathering inside a church that met to sing and spiritually prepare for whatever might come. When the torchbearers appeared in the darkness outside, those in the church were uncertain about what they should do.

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So they prayed and kept singing and as they exited the church from the back, elderly women helped elderly women get to their cars safely.

The Rabbis and congregation of Beth Israel had requested that the police provide security—one officer during Friday night and Saturday morning services. Their request unmet, they removed their Torah scrolls, including a Holocaust scroll for safekeeping, hired their own security guard, and worshipped anyway. John Aguilar, a 30-year Navy veteran showed up to also keep watch over the synagogue Friday night and Saturday. And a frail, elderly woman came, too. A Roman Catholic, she was in tears, wanting to stay and watch over the synagogue.ⁱⁱ

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Katie Couric writes that though she saw hatred and bitterness that provoked outrage and anger, she also saw “kindness, compassion, and generosity. Amid the fury,” she writes, “I saw Muslim, Jewish, black, and white protesters with arms linked forming a human chain. ...I saw strangers comforting relatives of the injured with a fierce compassion. I saw pastors and pedestrians running toward a scene of chaos not knowing what else was about to happen but determined to help.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When uncertain, love one another.



It is, in the end, why Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is why he went steadfastly toward the cross. It is why he offered Judas a piece of bread. And loved a disciple who didn't have a clue what going to happen next. And asked Simon Peter who denied him three times, to feed his sheep in the new church about to be born. It is why he still prays for us, fragile and failing as we are, and sends us out to be his representatives in the world with this much, which is everything:

When uncertain, love one another.

Amen.

ⁱ Kate Bowler, **Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)** New York: Random House, 2018, 111-113.

ⁱⁱ As recounted by Alan Zimmerman, president of Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, VA: "Local Jewish Community Presses On" August 14, 2017 <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/08/14/charlottesville-local-jewish-community-presses>

ⁱⁱⁱ Katie Couric, "Being in Charlottesville Broke My Heart. It also Filled Me with Hope," published August 18, 2017 in The National Geographic <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/08/charlottesville-racism-confederate-couric/>