

**THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

April 4, 2020

“Hosanna”

Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk

Gospel of Matthew 26: 19-29

So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal. While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Meditation

Will you pray with me?

God, may these words I speak, and the meditations of all our hearts and heads be pleasing in your sight, and transformative in ours, for you are our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

One liturgical year ago this week, I stood at the First Church pulpit for my first full Sunday as your Minister.

I don’t know if you remember, but during the word of God for all ages, Gail volunteered, and served as a truly fabulous Herod – marching on her pretend Stallion with her loyal troops up one aisle, as a child volunteered to play Jesus, riding the worse-for-wear donkey up another aisle.

The point was to show that Jesus’ march into Jerusalem was revolutionary street theater – designed to show the Roman Empire that poor people with tree branches and a donkey were as powerful as all the wealth in the world.

Designed to remind us that love is the most powerful politics of them all.

Since then, so much has changed. I gave birth to my sweet, and already sassy, Carolyn Luella, and you were gifted with three months of the delightful Gary Lewis. We said goodbye to Ava, and anticipate the joyful arrival of Hannah, in just a few months’ time.

We have buried a few saints of the church, Karl Ashline, Loren Barr, and Ray Harwick among them. We have baptized a few as well, Clarke, and Elijah and Simon.

We have worshipped with Jazz bands and folk singers, and just a few months ago, we stood near the middle of the longest night, held candles into the darkness, and sang of a silent night 2,000 years ago. A night of new life that took place in a cramped space, all alone, because there was no place else for them to go.

And, of course, that isn't such a far stretch from where we find ourselves now. Instead of joyfully and triumphantly celebrating a year together, instead of joyfully and triumphantly celebrating the arrival of Jesus in our lives, we are crowded around screens, in our own homes, watching spring emerge around us mostly through panes of glass.

And I don't know about you, but I think I understand Palm Sunday better now. I understand why all those people would be so eager to gather and shout, why the promise of strong and compassionate leadership would cause someone to throw down their coat, saying let me protect the very ground you walk on, why an entire people could be so hungry for God, for deliverance, that they would risk their lives for it, publicly opposing authoritarian and indifferent sovereignty.

I think I understand better now.

One of my favorite contemporary Christian writers is the Rev. Vince Amlin. Vince is the pastor of a start-up church outside of Chicago, and his sermon two weeks ago was on prayer. How usually we find it hard to pray for what we want – understanding that God is not there to find us a parking spot, to grant wishes, but to hold us in solidarity in the hardest times. But now, he says, now he finds himself praying “save them.” For all his loved ones, his daughter, parents, all his beloveds. Not because he necessarily thinks that's the way God works, but because he can't not pray it. Because God has told us to pray for what we really need.

And so he does.

Save them.

The ones whose breath hurts in their lungs.

The nurses and the doctors running on too little sleep and too little protective gear.

Save them.

The truck drivers and grocery store clerks and utility clerks.

Save them.

Hosanna.

Our parents, and grandparents.

The neighbor down the hall, or down the street.

Save them.

Save us.

Hosanna.

I think I understand Palm Sunday better now.

One of my immediate family has both lung disease and diabetes. And they continue to go to work.

And each time I hear the infection rate going up – over a million now – and the death toll rising – 60,000 now and increasing daily – well, the fear creeps in to my little hamlet here on the hill in Middlesex, the fear creeps in, thinking I might not see them again, and I just want to put my palm branches down at Jesus' feet and yell *Save Them*.

Each time Carolyn coughs.

Each time I am forced to leave the house, and I look at my hands afterwards, scrubbing away at them, trying to wash away something I can't even see, wondering what I've brought back in with me.

Hosanna, God.

On that first Palm Sunday, the people of Judea were gathering in Jerusalem to celebrate the anniversary of God delivering them from slavery – from the plagues of pestilence, and disease, storms and famine, and yes, even the deaths of the most vulnerable. They gathered to remember that God had delivered them in the past, and would again, from governments who cared little for the lives of their people, from systems that oppressed the sickest and the poor.

Yet, when the people of Judea gathered to shower Jesus with palm branches and prayer, they did so to show that the powers of wealth and violence are little compared to the power of people united with faith in something more.

This might be the most unusual Palm Sunday we've had in all our lifetimes, but it just might be the closest to the original. Because, though we are separated from one another physically, we are united in ways that are far more powerful.

And perhaps, just perhaps, we understand now the power of that unity in ways we might not have otherwise.

Just as it is today, it was an effective, if terrifying message for Herod. He heard it loud and clear, and we all know that by the end of the week he thought he had put an end to it.

But their hosannas persisted.

Their message of hope and faith in what was to come, well, that persisted, and in some part due to the things on this table.

Because these things gave the disciples courage to travel on, even when they were alone, even when they were afraid, the bread and the cup, they told the story of a love that was greater than their fear. Greater than what isolated them from the rest of the world.

They tell the story of what unites us.

Friends, the story of this holy week occurred precisely to help reveal the meaning of times such as these.

To expose the deeper truths in at work in the darkest and most difficult times in our lives.

And you see, Jesus, knowing that they would need something when he could no longer be with them, well he sat them down in a room by themselves.

And he took the things he had in front of him – the things they would always have with them – the bread on their table and the cup of their wine – and he transformed it into a powerful message of communion, with him, and with one another.

Now, there is great debate about whether or not communion can be celebrated when we are not together. It is, after all, meant to be what unites us. Many churches have chosen to forgo the celebration of communion until the ban on physical gathering is lifted, and we can

gather safely as the physical body of God, and a pastor can bless the elements that are served to you.

I understand this, completely, and they are not wrong. This is meant to be a celebration for the gathered body. And I fully believe that when we are together, this ritual will take a different meaning for all of us. So if you choose not to celebrate this meal with us today, that is fine and right and good, and I look forward to blessing and breaking bread with you again soon.

But I also firmly believe that Jesus gave us this meal to remind us of his presence whenever we most in need, and wherever we find ourselves. As often as you do this, he said, do this in remembrance of me.

The first followers, in Emmaus, they did not have the proper set up, they didn't say the right words, and still Jesus appeared to them in the cup and the bread.

So, too, I trust that Jesus will appear to us in this meal this day. Because we *are* gathered together. And I trust Jesus is not bound by something as earthly as walls.

As one colleague, Rev. Hay of Essex put it: "My take-away is that Eucharist embodies the cruciform reality of the Divine actively entering into human suffering, alienation, and isolation. That would include our present pandemic-induced isolation. Our participation not only recalls, but enfleshes God's liberating love in the world."

Like those first disciples, afraid to go outside, afraid of what might come next, Jesus calls to us today from the ordinary things of our homes – the things we all have – and says remember. Remember when it gets hard that I am with you. Because in so doing we make ourselves the vessels of God's love.

Remember when you break bread that on my last night, my very last night, what I chose to do with my time was to take bread, and bless it – giving thanks to God for it – and give it to you saying, "take and eat, this is my body". *This is my body, with you.*

And likewise he took the cup and said "*drink of it, all of you, this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.*"

As often as you do this, do this in remembrance of me.

Friends, the things on this table, on all our tables, are the reasons we proclaim the mystery of our faith – that Christ has died, of course, but also that he has risen, and he will come again.

Which we pray for now, *hosanna*. Deliver us. Forgive us all the inequities this virus has laid bare. All the fear we have let gain control. Forgive us, deliver us, restore us, redeem us. Enter into this time, and deliver us.

So I would invite you now, as you are able and willing, to take your bread and your cup, and hold them up. Together we will give thanks to God for them, ask God to bless them that they might bless us that we might bless each other.

Let us pray:

God we are physically far apart. It is not one loaf we eat from, but many. But we know that you make many from one, and we trust you can also make one from many. So do so now.

Send your Spirit into these breads, dive deep into all our cups, that when we eat and drink of them, we might know the sacred, deeply mysterious truth, that we are all One in you. Help us take this truth into our very bodies with this meal, transform us that the lessons of this time might continue long after this meal has finished, this isolation ended. Amen.