



First United Church, Waterloo
Palm Sunday - March 28, 2021

Sermon by the Rev. Rose Ann Vita

We Enter into the Sacred Story

SCRIPTURE: John 12:12-15 Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

REFLECTION Sing Hosanna! The Rev. Rose Ann Vita

Sing Hosanna: Sing an expression of adoration, praise, or joy!

Can you believe, today is Palm Sunday. We have gone through a whole year, mostly locked down in our homes . . . as I remain under grey restrictions . . . Palm Sunday . . . a day that might carry many memories for most of you, especially those who have been cradle members of a Christian Church . . . and for those who are visiting with us today, this is what we did as children: Our Sunday School classes would march into the worship service, waving palm branches, singing songs laced with hosannas . . . we would begin our Sunday service as a re-enactment of Jesus' entering Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover . . . often a toy donkey would be pulled along followed by someone dressed in a robe to represent Jesus.

Most often we would read the long Passion narratives as recorded in the synoptic gospels . . . Matthew, Mark, and Luke . . . syn-optic . . . meaning that these three Gospels have the same or a common view of the testimonies of the life of Jesus of Nazareth . . . these three gospels record the stories of Jesus of Nazareth more or less the same, including more or less the same events, in more or less the same order . . .

But today is different:

- **First, there are no children waving palms, no procession.** (Just pandemic)
- **Second, there is no reading of long scripture passages** from the ends of the Gospels that record the accounts of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. These passages record Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his turning over the tables in the temple, the Last Supper believed to institute communion, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, Jesus' arrest and trial by temple authorities and sentencing to death by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, a Roman authority . . .

Today is different.

Today we will hear three short passages from the Gospel according to John. This arrangement of the events of Jesus' life, even the events themselves, are different than how they are recorded in the other three Gospels.

For example:

- **today's readings come from chapter 12**, in the middle of John's Gospel, not the end.
- **the turning of the tables** in the temple in John were recorded in chapter 2 . . .
- **there is no communion** supper recorded in John. Instead, Jesus' washing of the feet of his disciples is recorded . . .
- **there is no Passover meal where the sacrificed lamb is eaten** with unleavened bread . . . because in the account according to John, Jesus is the sacrificed Passover Lamb of God, and that takes place on the cross . . .
- **And the story of the raising of Lazarus**, is only recorded in John . . .

Why is John so different?

My understanding is that each account or witness narrative of Jesus's was recorded by a different community of faith that addressed the concerns of that particular community, in that particular time. So how the sacred story was told, in what order, and what events were emphasized or not, was relevant to that particular community of faith.

Today we have John's version of Palm Sunday.

Today we have Jesus' entry into Jerusalem for the Passover feast as people wave palm branches. The waving of palm branches was associated with one of pilgrimage festivals in Jewish culture connected with planting and harvest.

At the time this story was recorded, there were three important pilgrimage festivals in Jewish culture. All related to planting and harvest. All related to people coming to the temple to bring God their gifts of the first fruits of their harvest:

“Three times a year shall all your men appear before the Lord your God in the place that God will choose (referring presumably to the Temple in Jerusalem), on the festivals of Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks what we call Pentecost), and Sukkot (the Festival of Booths). They shall not appear empty handed. Each shall bring his own gift, appropriate to the blessing which the Lord your God has given you”

Deuteronomy 16:16

So today we have heard a short account of Jesus coming to Jerusalem, following his Jewish custom to celebrate Passover . . . and he brought his own gift, himself.

During the *Offering Section* of today's worship, we will hear more about our bringing our gifts, appropriate to the blessings that we have received. But for now let's continue with the hearing of the scripture . . . let's listen with our hearts.

SCRIPTURE: John 12:16-19 Disciples Remember Lazarus

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So, the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

REFLECTION Friend in Death, Who Weeps for Our Dying!

Lazarus is an odd name. So, I looked up its meaning on a Google Search:

Here is what I learned about the name Lazarus:

It is derived from the Hebrew אלעזר, El‘āzār (Eleazar)

meaning "God has helped".

It also is a medical term:

In medicine, **Lazarus** is the patient who, believed dead, spontaneously starts to circulate blood.

And it has taken on a psychological meaning:

A **Lazarus Moment** is by definition a **moment** in time where you find yourself helpless and lost, maybe even parts of you are dead but something pulls you up from the depths again. Revives your purpose and your vision.

But in the account according to John, the raising of Lazarus is the seventh of seven signs that Jesus performs in this Gospel, namely:

1. Changing water into wine at Cana in John 2:1-11 - "the first of the signs"
2. Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum in John 4:46-54
3. Healing the paralytic at Bethesda in John 5:1-15
4. Feeding the 5000 in John 6:5-14
5. Jesus walking on water in John 6:16-24
6. Healing the man blind from birth in John 9:1-7
7. The raising of Lazarus in John 11:1-45

The seven signs are seen by some scholars and theologians as evidence of new creation theology in the Gospel of John, the resurrection of Jesus being the implied eighth sign, indicating a week of creation and then a new creation beginning with the resurrection.

But for Jesus, the raising of Lazarus was the beginning of the end.

In this account according to John, right before the passage we heard this morning, Jesus raises Lazarus from his death. Then Jesus and Lazarus and others enter Jerusalem. The gospel account states:

⁹ When the great crowd of the Temple authorities learned that Jesus was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. John 12:9-11

So, this well-crafted account by John is leading us through Holy Week in its own unique way.

Can't you feel the tension rise because Jesus upset the authorities? Jesus bringing forth life from death is a revolutionary concept that upsets their position of power. People were following Jesus and leaving their former ways behind!

I wonder if in the same way Jesus isn't upsetting us. Calling us to follow him . . . to embrace a new way of being . . . to become a new creation in Christ.

Jesus' foreshadowing the Resurrection and inviting us to be a Resurrection people might be frightening . . . and a yet, Jesus' way of living is a true Passover, a path of liberation from bondage to a new way of blessing.

Let's continue listening whole-heartedly to our last passage of scripture for today:

SCRIPTURE: John 12:20-26 Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

REFLECTION Do You Wish to See Jesus?

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." For the community of John, and for us, this simple statement is a joyous culmination. Maybe even more celebratory than Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

You see, the Johannine community, as were all early groups that followed Jesus, was rooted in Israel and considered themselves as an off shoot of their Jewish heritage.

But when the Greeks --- when those who were not "cradle-Jews" --- catch the message, get curious and are pulled toward Jesus by the Holy Spirit, a new dawn, a new era, a new moment is born.

"We wish to see Jesus. We wish to see Jesus!"

And for those of us who are cradle-Christians, and for those who are visiting and are guests at worship today, deep-down in your heart, do you wish to see Jesus?

If so, then follow. Follow. "Stop, look, and listen." Learn and do. Be open to the Spirit's prompting. And be not afraid . . . for a joyous culmination is coming.

May it be so. Amen