

“The In-Between Time”

Matthew 21:1-11 NRSV

Pastor Liz Miller

April 2, 2023

When I think about the year we worshipped entirely online because of COVID, there is not a lot that I miss from that experience. There is not a lot that I would willingly bring back or continue in lieu of having the option to gather in our sanctuary. The one exception that I think we should bring back is how we celebrated Palm Sunday.

Our socially distant Palm Sunday celebration had us leave our computer screens on Sunday morning and meet each other outside. We gathered in front of the church for a parade and protest. Edgewood members and friends brought old signs from past protests they had attended - signs telling us to Wage Peace, Not War, and Black Lives Matter and Love Is Love Is Love, signs demanding Reproductive Freedom Now. We took our signs and we marched around the block together - a scrappy intergenerational group with folks from ages 8 to 88, walking down Hagadorn and through the Sunday morning quiet of our MSU-student filled neighborhood. We sang songs and chanted but the front of the group could never hear the back of the group so the words faded in and out. It was a brief parade, but it was a sacred reenactment of the Palm Sunday processional long ago.

The power of the Palm Sunday story that kicks off our Holy Week is that it happens out in the streets. It's not a quiet Christmas story that unfolds in a stable where no one knows it is happening. It is not like so many of the Jesus stories that happen in someone's house or on a boat

or up a mountain where only the hardiest of travelers could find it or away in a tiny town where there are fewer onlookers. Palm Sunday is in the streets of Jerusalem, in the middle of public, in the midst of the big city where curious onlookers and clueless locals would have been mingling with disciples and detractors alike. There was no ignoring the presence of Jesus and the processional with his followers on that first Palm Sunday.

It would have been as unusual back then as it was today to have the streets shut down or taken over by something other than the typical traffic patterns. Today, living in East Lansing, I've seen our city streets in the center of town shut down for only three different types of events. The first is the annual Homecoming Parade which has folks at every intersection directing you to a different route and making sure you can still get to where you are going. It's planned, it's quick, and it's easy to avoid.

The second is after major sporting events like in 2019 when MSU made it to the Final Four and the revelers took to the streets to express their glee with the traditional burning of the couches and flipping of the cars. It was a sight to see, one most of us would rather not see, but because those outbursts are predictably paired with sporting events, we all know to stay home and stay off the streets.

The third instance is for political protests, some that have started outside City Hall and some that have started at The Rock on campus. One of the more recent ones I remember is from June 2020 when protests against police violence spilled into the streets and became a march down Grand River. During these marches, there is no advance notice from the city that the street will be shut down. There is no planned rerouting of cars or permit that is pulled. They are intended to feel disruptive, to focus our attention on an important issue, to make us take notice of how we feel when we encounter folks marching in the street: Inconvenienced? Annoyed?

Empathetic? Upset by the experiences that lead to protests? These modern encounters with our own protests and marches best mirror the first Palm Sunday.

Imagine: there is Jesus riding down the middle of the streets and his followers flanking him, proclaiming “Hosanna! Save Us!” And there is everyone else - looking on, startled or unsettled, confused or annoyed, curious or apathetic, all together in the city, uncertain of what is happening or what will come next.

In this way, Palm Sunday is for everyone, whether you were planning on it or not. It’s a celebration that requires uncertainty and a touch of confusion. It invites disruption rather than the order that we enact every other Sunday. It’s a procession that pushes us to places of discomfort and asks us the question: what belief do we hold so dear that we are willing to disrupt the status quo for? What will compel us to go into the streets and stop traffic? To risk being yelled at or challenged or even arrested? What is so important to us that we are willing to leave the sanctuary and go through the neighborhood, risking being seen or disturbing the quiet rhythms of the neighborhood?

It’s a purposely unsettling question. What or who will compel us to show up and take a stand? This is the question that is asked again and again throughout Holy Week. Holy Week is a series of stories that document the last days of Jesus’ life and death. Each of the stories we tell is embedded with the same question: what will compel us to show up and keep showing up? Will you show up at all?

As Holy Week unfolds, the ways that the witnesses and followers of Jesus answer this question changes. On Palm Sunday, everyone is there. Friends and foes, empathetic supporters and enemies, no one is excluded. You can find them in the crowds whether they are waving palms or plotting Jesus’ demise.

On Monday, the story goes that Jesus went up to the Mount of Olives and began telling parables about what was going to happen in the world - the destruction that would come if people did not learn to love one another as God intended. In the crowd that listened to these predictions were opponents of his who questioned his parables and questioned his theology and questioned his identity. There people listening to him who hung on his every word as well as people who quietly whispered in the back and plotted his destruction. It was a public space but set apart from the crowds of the city streets or the temple, quieter and smaller but still charged with energy and anticipation.

On Tuesday, the holy week story is of Jesus clearing the temples, overturning tables and casting out money changers. So it's a slightly smaller crowd of onlookers - it's the religious folks, not everyone out in the streets. But it's still pretty public, it's still a story full of supporters and detractors together, clearly separated into their camps but both present.

On Wednesday, there is no story about what Jesus did this day. Most people believe he needed a rest. This day is known as Spy Wednesday because this is the day that Judas snuck away from his fellow disciples and made a deal to turn Jesus over to the authorities, a deal that would lead to his arrest and death. Wednesday is the turning point. The crowds are gone. The disciples and Jesus are off on their own. The spy and Jesus' opponents are off together.

On Thursday, Maundy Thursday, the story is so powerful that even today we gather together as a church to retell it and act out its rituals. It's the story of the meal in the upper room. The story of Jesus' feet being washed and his washing his disciple's feet in return, modeling humility and servant leadership through this act. It's the story of the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine and the promise of God's grace and forgiveness for everyone. It's a powerful story but it's a quiet story. Just the twelve disciples and Jesus together. Tucked away

from the crowds. Safe from harm for the moment and focused on the sacred moment before them.

On Friday, we tell the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, death, and burial. Good Friday not because it's "good" in the fun sense, but because it's good in the sacred sense - the end being as sacred as the beginning - inviting us to show up in the crowds that witnessed Jesus' public execution, inviting us to imagine whether we would be with Peter as he denied knowing Jesus or we would have the courage to stand with Nicodemus and wait to be allowed to remove the broken body from the cross.

Saturday the story is one of holding vigil near Jesus's body resting in the tomb. It is a story not of crowds and energy but of quiet and just a few faithful followers left behind, waiting and grieving together. Even the detractors have gone home, satisfied that their work is done.

And on Sunday, Easter Sunday, we know the story of the stone rolling away and the tomb being empty, of Christ's resurrection and the promise that life will always conquer death, that nothing can extinguish God's enduring message of love. But even though our pews are filled on Easter Sunday, it's really a quiet story, with only a few women and an angel as witnesses, none of the twelve disciples present, no detractors to dispute the events, only the most courageous and faithful left to tell the story to the others.

In each of these stories the question is asked: in what way will you show up? Will you be in the clueless crowd or one of the disciples? Will you be a detractor or a supporter? Will you take a stand or will you quietly disappear with so many others? Palm Sunday is big and public and hard to miss, but will you come back for the other stories? Will you step into the ritual of Maundy Thursday? Will you face the death and pain of Good Friday? Will you hold vigil until the sun rises on Easter morning and the tomb is rolled away? Each of these stories sees fewer and

fewer people present. The divisions between the faithful and the corrupt become stronger as holy week unfolds and each year, by retelling the stories and reenacting the stories we are asked again: will we stay with Jesus until the end? When we yell “Hosanna! Save Us!” Do we mean it, or will we set down our palms and slip away, only to return with the crowd, when it is safe, when it is not disruptive, when it is easy to blend in?

Palm Sunday is an invitation, an opening, a hope that this year, this time, we will follow Jesus from the parade and procession into the temple, up the Mount of Olives, into the upper room, to the cross, and into the tomb. It is an invitation to follow Jesus into difficult places, to confront our own pain and grief and fears, to practice again, together, what it means to disrupt the status quo in the name of Christ’s love. May it be so. Amen.