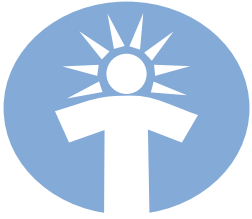


Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ



Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

April 5, 2020

PALM



SUNDAY

*We respond to God's call
by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity,
race, gender identity, sexual orientation or
socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed
the love of Christ,
we affirm that all may share in the full life,
ministry, fellowship, responsibilities and
blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are
or where you are on life's journey, you are
welcome here.*

Order of Worship

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

PRELUDE

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

LITURGY OF THE PALMS

Reading from the Gospel

Matthew 21: 1-11

The Pastor and Student Pastors

(Student Minister Tracey Harris, as Jesus)

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage (a village the name of which means, "Home of the Young Figs"), at the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two of the disciples a task.

He said to them, "Go into that village over there. As soon as you enter it you will find a donkey tied up and a young colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it."

He sent them off right away.

Now this happened, to fulfill what the prophet had said,

Say to daughter Zion, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring."

The disciples went, just as Jesus had ordered them. They brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted,

Hosanna to the son of David! Blessings to the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! By the time Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked.

The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee!"

GATHERING HYMN

Hosanna, Loud Hosanna

Jennette Threlfall, *alt.*

"Hosanna, loud hosanna!" the little children sang;
Through pillared court and temple the lovely anthem rang;
To Jesus, who had bleseed them and folded to his breast,
The children sang their praises, the simplest and the best.

"Hosanna in the highest!" that ancient song is ours.
We hail our great Redeemer and sing with all our powers:
"Hosanna, Christ, we praise you with life and heart and voice.
Hosanna in your presence forever we'll rejoice!"

BLESSING OF PALMS

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*; Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

O Sovereign Jesus Christ,

We expect you.

Humble and riding on a donkey,

We greet you.

Acclaimed by crowds and caroled by children,

We cheer you.

Moving from the peace of the countryside to the corridors of power,

We salute you, Christ our Savior.

You are giving the beasts of burden a new dignity; you are giving majesty a new face;
you are giving those who long for redemption a new song to sing.

With them, with heart and voice, we shout, “Hosanna!”

O God, here with us now, bless these palms we wave.

**We pray that as we carry them in Christ’s name, so we may ever
acknowledge Christ in the way that leads to eternal life. All praise to
you, O God, in Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy
Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.**

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Meet the Donkey

Tracey Harris, *Dir. of Christian Ed.*

[Pastor Tracey talks about KC (the donkey she’s ridden as “Jesus”) and Jesus’ donkey]

ANTHEM

Ride On, King Jesus

Spiritual

(Dr. Leon Burke, III, *Director of Music*)

THE WORD SHARED

Merrimon Boyd

From the Writings

Matthew 26:36-46

New Revised Standard Version

³⁶ After supper, Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

³⁷ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.”

³⁹ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “Abba, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.”

⁴⁰ Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

⁴² Again he went away (for the second time) and prayed, “Abba, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

⁴³ Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time saying the same words.

⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY “*Definitely Not Violence vs. Non-Violence*”

Rev. Denoon

It’s been six weeks since we began a series examining the book, *Entering the Passion of*

Jesus, by Amy-Jill Levine. She is a Jewish scholar of Christian history at Vanderbilt University, and she brings some wonderful insights to familiar stories of the last week of Jesus' earthly life.

The last chapter of the book addresses the incidents at Gethsemane, the grounds around the olive press on the Mount of Olives. If you go to Israel today (and I am not advising you to be doing discretionary travel), but if you do go there, I hear the view of the Holy City from the Mount of Olives really is pretty wonderful. In Jesus' day, the first major building in your field of vision would have been the Temple. Nowadays, it's the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall... still pretty impressive.

Pilgrims, like Jesus and the followers who came with him for Passover, adored this passage into the City. This was also the route Jesus took on Palm Sunday when he emulated the king described in Zechariah, chapter 9, "humble and riding on a donkey." So, I find it interesting – after that triumphant day – that Jesus would return here for the moment of his betrayal and arrest. (Talk about contrasts!)

Footnote:

A-J's emphasis in Chapter 6 is the risk that Jesus took, to scorn his disciples' choice of violence as the response to his arrest there. Luke professes that at least two of them were armed. All four gospels claim that one of those who was armed (Luke and John allege that it was Peter) struck one of the people in the crowd, cutting off an ear.

Of all the people who would have had to endure the violence of another, the idea that it would be a slave is really upsetting when you think about it. If there would have been anyone the least likely to be actively participating in Jesus' arrest, you'd think it would be a slave. And all the four evangelists say that it was a slave – the slave of the high priest himself.

Why was he struck? Was he an easy target? Was the intended victim actually the high priest, but the slave threw himself between the attacker and his master just as the blow was about to be struck? Whatever the reason, I get a phenomenal sense of injustice.

But you begin to understand just why Jesus' response was as emphatic as it was: "Put your sword back in its place," he says in Matthew, Luke, and John. Then, in Matthew and Luke: "Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword." And in John, "Am I *not* to drink of the cup that's been given me?"

You all can go ahead and ruminate on that for a while. It's not that I don't think that the choice Jesus made at that point, of non-violence over violence and the consequences he would have to endure, is like nothing I've ever addressed with you before. We live in a violent society, and the rigors of a non-violent one are tougher than most people want to manage. I've gone there before; I don't need to go there now.

But there is somewhere else I feel compelled to go...

I want to examine with you those three prayers Matthew says Jesus prayed at

Gethsemane – or rather, that one prayer he said (kind of) three times: “Abba, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet, not what I want but what you want.”

Let there be no doubt: Jesus was hesitant to die. He loved life, and he loved everyone around him. Furthermore, he didn’t want to suffer in the way, he knew, any political prisoner must. He felt the strain and stress of the moment, and he wanted to avoid it.

“The cup,” of course, was a metaphor for the outcome of his living and teaching that he was about to endure. It’s reminiscent of the cup he had earlier shared with his disciples at the close of their Passover seder. “This is my blood of the covenant,” he had said. *And all of them drank from it*, the narrator continues ominously.

Yes, so they did.

And, incidentally, so do we.

Maybe our cup’s contents don’t unfold quite as dramatically as they did for Jesus or the disciples. Jesus, of course, was crucified, as were – according to lore – Peter and Andrew; Thomas died at the end of a spear, James the less by bludgeoning, and on and on. Only John among the male disciples did not have his life ended by someone else. All the women evidently lived into their old age, but you can imagine that life as a Christian in the first century could be a worrisome project.

So, when Jesus is praying at Gethsemane, that reluctance we witness him experiencing is very familiar.

We all have decisions we’ve made, the outcomes of which we would rather not endure. Breakups and divorces. Firings and resignations. I’d class jobs we’d really rather not have to accept among those decisions. But also moves and other big transitions. Just deciding to travel by airplane can make for anxiety for me – all that questionably filtered air being recirculated for however many thousands of miles I’ll be traveling. I always know that I’m going to have some sort of upper respiratory infection, when I get where I’m going.

I think of migrant workers and refugees and others who don’t have a place to call home. These and other groups of people who exist on the outskirts of our love don’t have words or actions or status that can prevent their victimization and suffering.

John’s gospel doesn’t like the idea of a Jesus praying to avoid the cup. He doesn’t pray in the garden, he prays instead at the table for his disciples and for the church. When Judas shows up at the betrayal, there is no kiss to identify Jesus. Instead, Jesus strides forward to demand of the guard who have come to arrest him, “Who are you looking for?” and proceeds to orchestrate his own incarceration.

Matthew and the others are subtler about Jesus’ cooperation with the inevitable, but the Savior never loses control in their accounts. He simply receives what he knows is coming, without complaint, and – when he speaks – answers with integrity and defiance. He does not bend; he lives his word and action.

We are steeping in anxiety right now. Our country has the most people infected by the coronavirus. We are about to see a spike in diagnoses and deaths, say the epidemiologists. It’s about to be the worst it’s been, practically anywhere.

We are a people who have based our system of government and our economy on free

trade, free choice, free movement, and free access. Except in times of war, those freedoms have rarely been curtailed. It's a free country, we like to say. And many of the people who say that, I must admit, are not making the wisest or best informed decisions. The fact is, we do not deny anyone the opportunity or possibility of being stupid.

Bear in mind, there have been many occasions when it has clearly been to the advantage of the ruling classes, when stupidity among the majority has been encouraged. The whole host of -isms in our national consciousness bear that out, as well as some freedoms which here will go unnamed but which confound me...

"It's a free country" and "You can't fix Stupid." I don't think we can afford to abide entirely either of these sayings, but we tend as a people to uphold them. We therefore have to expect to endure and suffer the consequences of such words and their attendant actions. And the spread of this virus, as well as its anticipated spike, indicate profoundly the truth I'm referring to here.

"Abba, take this cup from us," we will pray.

Like Jesus, however, the inevitable will come to us. Jesus saw this and said, "Yet not what I want, but what you want." Not that it is God's will for people to be so sick, I don't want you to hear me saying that. Or maybe there is something to that, that God wants us to understand the consequences of our words and actions, and the price we really do have to pay for them.

No, our pathos is not quite the same as Jesus' Passion. But we do know the stress that comes as we anticipate an unwanted outcome.

He faced his, assured of God's faithfulness. So must we, by the grace of God.

Amen.

PRAYER HYMN

My Song Is Love Unknown

Samuel Crossman, *alt.*

My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.
O who am I that for my sake
My God should take frail flesh, and die?
My God should take frail flesh, and die?

I sing my plain belief, one song my heart outpours;
Never was pain or grief, never was love like yours.
This is my Friend in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend,
I all my days could gladly spend.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Share Our Joys and Concerns

Please remember the following as you pray, today:

Joyce Berger, recovering from a fall

Marshall Brooks, homebound at a senior residence in Arkansas

Margaret Gustafson and her family; her nephew is in hospice care
The Rev. Jack Newsome, homebound at a local senior residence
Becky Scott, recovering from physical challenges
Jaymie Woodsmall, an ICU nurse at MOBap
health care workers, first responders, and delivery and grocery workers
people living with COVID-19
people who feel isolated and alone

Prayer of the Day

Prayer of Our Savior

BENEDICTION

From the *Byzantine Vespers*

Passing from one divine feast to another, from palms and branches, let us now make haste, O faithful, to the solemn and saving celebration of Christ's passion. Let us behold him undergo voluntary suffering for our sake, and let us sing to Christ with thanksgiving a fitting hymn:

Fountain of tender mercy and haven of salvation,
O holy One, glory to you!

POSTLUDE

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