

“In Times of Turmoil”  
Psalm 121; Matthew 21:1-11  
Palm Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville  
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This has been a weird Lent, to say the least. More eloquent words occasionally come to mind to describe it - disparate, strange, turbulent, mysterious, tumultuous. But I think I'll stick with weird. For me, the weirdest thing about it - beyond having my children home all day, every day, not being able to hug my parents when I occasionally drop things off and mourning the death of a family member from afar - has been missing the rhythm of corporate worship. I am a pastor who was raised the daughter of an organist/choir director and I am married to an ordained elder - worshipping weekly with the body of Christ is part of who I am...at the core of my being. It grounds my family life and it reminds me of who I am week in and week out. I would imagine that many of you feel the same way. Looking out on a Sunday morning, in this sanctuary, and seeing your faces matters to me. It shapes me and informs my work. Don't get me wrong, this has been a wild adventure, worshipping via live stream and crafting the services each week with my wonderful and capable colleagues...but it is just different. It's weird.

So that got me to thinking about other times things have been different surrounding Holy Week. And I realized that, not too long ago, I spent two consecutive Holy Weeks in a different, unsettled, turbulent kind of space.

In 2016, our son, Teddy, was born on St. Patrick's Day, which, that year, happened to be 3 days before Palm Sunday. That year, I spent Holy Week learning what it meant to mother 2 children instead of 1. I was up in the wee hours nursing a newborn and not fully in tune with the rhythms of Holy Week. But I do remember Mary Eliza coming home that Palm Sunday with a palm branch from the children's processional at church. And I have vivid memories of David helping her fill her Easter basket with flowers the next Sunday, to take to flower the cross at church on Easter. After they returned, our new family of four had an Easter Egg hunt with hand-dyed eggs in the backyard. Teddy was nestled close to my chest in a Moby wrap, Mary Eliza was clasping my hand, and it was cold, because Easter was in March that year. I don't think the dogwoods or azaleas had even budded yet. It wasn't typical, but it was full of holy, resurrection-bathed moments. Nothing quite speaks to new life like a newborn in your home.

Lent 2017 was an even more unsettled time for me because my family and I were preparing to move here, to Greenville, and to become a part of the Westminster family of faith. Three years ago, my final Sunday as the Associate Pastor of my previous congregation was the fourth Sunday of Lent. The fifth Sunday of Lent found us driving around the inner banks of North Carolina, enjoying God's creation and Palm Sunday found us all packed up with a moving van in our driveway. In order to get two toddlers out of the moving company's hair, I took a walk with Teddy and Mary Eliza right around the time worship would be starting. I piled them into our red wagon and off we went, cruising the neighborhood we would soon be leaving for good. Along the way, we found signs of new life that enabled us to talk about the story of Palm Sunday. We first spotted the dogwood blossoms in our own yard, but then we saw them everywhere. So we stopped to admire the newly blossomed flowers and we talked about how they pointed to the cross. I don't know who first passed the lesson of the dogwood flower onto me, my mom or my great aunt, or maybe my dad, but I took that moment to relay the same lesson to my children - two short petals, two long, all four with reddish marks, reminiscent of the cross and the wounds on Jesus' hands and feet. I quickly broke a branch of that dogwood off to take with us on our walk and I realized that we were almost having our own little parade...praising Jesus, remembering the story, and giving thanks for this particular chapter in our lives. As we continued our walk that morning, we passed a myriad of houses that were home to our dear friends - the Robersons and the Stewarts, the Campbells and the Buchanans, the Durhams and the Steeds, the Warners and the Phillips. And as we passed each house, Teddy would babble and smile and Mary Eliza would laugh and ask questions. These were all landmarks along our way, representing people who had shaped us and contributed to our faith journey. By the end of our walk, we had a whole collection of sticks and azaleas blooms, rocks, pine needles, dogwood flowers, and weeds. Treasures we had collected to honor and remember the day.

I was reminded of this memory, of our Palm Sunday parade of three in our old neighborhood known as Wood Green, when I noticed the dogwoods blooming in my yard here in Greenville. And I've enjoyed admiring them and remembering the lessons they hold. I often catch a glimpse of them as I'm washing up after dinner in the evenings, when the sun is going down in a gentle blaze of color and the wind is lightly lifting the branches into the warm but still somewhat cooler air. And in the midst of weirdness, this is something good. It is something rather normal. It is something fast that I can hold onto. It is something resurrection-bathed.

That first Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, was weird. It was the first time something like that had happened. Verse 10 of our gospel lesson states it plainly for us: “the whole city was in turmoil”. The whole city was unsettled. The whole city was disturbed. Jerusalem was in a state of disquiet. You see, Jesus entered the city during a high holy time in the Jewish faith - Passover. Passover was a very holy season when Jews from all over ancient Israel would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the story of God’s providential care and mighty power in the lives of the Hebrew people when they were led out of slavery in Egypt. The celebration of Passover centered on a meal. And Jesus was coming to town to celebrate and to worship and to eat that meal. But Jesus wasn’t just an ordinary Jewish man. He was God’s own son...the Messiah, coming to turn the world upside down and to bring the hopes of all the years to fruition. Never before had God’s faithful in Jerusalem for the Passover worshipped an ordinary man...cutting branches and waving them...tossing their cloaks on the path he would trod. But never before had a person done the things Jesus did - healing, teaching, forgiving, loving...people were caught off guard. As Jesus prepared to enter this city he knew so well, one he would enter and never leave alive again, he would have passed by familiar sites. You see, he was a faithful Jewish man, raised by faithful Jewish parents...they would have gone to Jerusalem for high holy festivals like Passover as often as they could. Luke’s gospel tells us of how Jesus made this pilgrimage at the age of 12 with his parents. Remember, he got lost in the Temple? So he would have known the streets and the landmarks and even some of the faces. His entrance into the city marked the end of his ministry and the beginning of his passion.

This Palm Sunday, I encourage you to embrace the weird. Find a new rhythm. Look out your window and notice...the green on the trees, the dogwood flowers...the azaleas...the signs of new life. Look around inside of your home and acknowledge that things are turned upside down. Give that acknowledgement to God. Because God can do some of the greatest work in times like those. Remember...When there was chaos, God brought forth order in creation. When Pharaoh’s heart was hardened against the Hebrew people, God spoke to Moses in a burning bush. When God’s people were in exile, the prophets called them home to build homes and plant vineyards. When the city of Jerusalem was in turmoil, when the same crowds who shouted Hosanna jeered crucify, God gave us an empty tomb.

I know we cannot be together in person today. And that makes me just as sad as you. But we do have this...this holy, upended worship service over the internet. And we have streets to walk in, with homes of those we know to pass by, and landmarks

that have marked us to identity...so walk on those streets today, with your family or alone and have a parade for Jesus. Admire the dogwoods and remember. Hear the birds and give thanks. Feel the gentle breeze and know that the Holy Spirit moves the same way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.