

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
4.5.20; Palm Sunday
Is. 50:4-9a; Phil. 2:5-11;
Matt. 21:1-11

Embrace Uncertainty

A very wise teacher once told me, “Steve, if you are to be truly freed from worry, you will need to embrace uncertainty long enough until you learn from it.” Her words remind me of the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary...” At the time, I wasn’t exactly sure why my professor felt like she needed to say this to me, but she did. Perhaps she intuitively sensed that this was my growing edge and she, of course, was right. It still is my growing edge. I am fond of saying “Of the one percent of my life that I get to control, I want one thousand percent control of that one percent!

We are beginning this Holy Week with unprecedented uncertainty. From figuring out how to creatively participate in our time honored liturgies in their altered and virtual forms, to how to prepare for the joy of Easter to arrive as jobs evaporate, more die from the virus, as stock market and retirement funds continue to fluctuate, and hospitals and even countries compete for medical supplies that will likely remain in short supply well after Easter day. Yes, our heads are spinning with uncertainty as we struggle to find something or someone to anchor us.

Even the test itself for covid-19 can put us into a tailspin. As one blogger cleverly put it:

“IF you're Positive that it's a negative test result, then it's a Positive thing. A False Negative may not be a Positive thing, however. It could just be Fake news. Then, again, a Positive result may not be Negative since, it too, may be a False Positive, in which event, that would be Positive news that it might be, in fact, a Negative result - which would be the Most Positive outcome.”

Yes, we all need to learn how to embrace uncertainty and confusion long enough to learn, grow and be transformed by it regardless of whether we welcome it or not.

Believe it or not, we have arrived at Palm Sunday. Just like in Jesus’ day, it is a day which triggers uncertainty, confusion, contradictory thoughts, feelings, and motivations and reveals the very worst and best parts of our human nature.

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It begins with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—a street lined with the hopes and dreams of enthusiastic, palm waving followers welcoming the arrival of a long-awaited messiah who will save and liberate them; and then concludes with the sobering remembering of our Lord’s Passion on the Cross and its dark veil of uncertainty regarding the future.

For many of us, this may be the first time in our lives that we will enter Holy Week with the kind of radical uncertainty and disequilibrium that marked the experience of the first Christians. As one writer put it, “Not to the gates of Jerusalem *alone* does Jesus ride today, but to the gates of our hearts.” Jesus’ arrival to Jerusalem revealed all the divisions that lie within the human heart and within any community large or small. We are told that when Jesus arrived into Jerusalem the whole city was in turmoil asking, “Who and what is this that has arrived?”

Interestingly, the root word in Greek for turmoil used in this passage also means “intensely stirred up or shaken” as in an earthquake. It is truly a seismic event. It is a volatile collision of multiple groups of people with different agendas, experiences, and motivations just like in our culture today. On the one hand there was the group of loyal followers of Jesus who came from outside Jerusalem—from Galilee and the outskirts of the Holy City—who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and other great miracles and teachings of Jesus.

These were likely the ones who laid down the palms and shouted at the top of their lungs, “Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven.” On the other hand, there was the crowd inside of Jerusalem who had so much invested in maintaining and protecting the status quo that they couldn’t afford to empower a movement that could over-throw everything they had come to know and benefit from. This privileged crowd of religious and political leaders and financial power brokers were already plotting to kill him even before Jesus’ humble ride on a donkey had commenced.

And let us not forget the third group that many of us can relate to—the undecided voters who hadn’t made up their minds yet about what to do. This is the group too full of doubts, fears, and questions to risk failure, ridicule or worse. They were the ones counting the cost of following Jesus and ultimately decided Jesus’ fate by either choosing to free Barabbas rather than Jesus or remaining silence in the face of injustice.

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The gospel of Matthew adds this important detail to Luke's version of the story: the whole city was in turmoil as a spiritual earthquake had hit and so many were left running for cover—even Jesus' most committed disciples. Today, my beloved Christian sisters and brothers, we also are in a place of turmoil not too dissimilar from when an earthquake hits: "Not to the gates of Jerusalem alone does Jesus ride today, but to the gates of our hearts." I have been paying close attention to my own spiritual pulse as I encounter temptations that have not been present during other Lenten journeys I have been on.

For example, this week I caught myself over-distancing myself from a deeply distressed neighbor who revealed from a distance of over thirty feet that she had the coronavirus, would soon be losing her job, and would likely be selling her house and moving. Despite the gravitational pull of the Holy Spirit to move closer to her, I literally found myself backing my way into the front door of our house as she remained talking to me. I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul said when he encountered the darkness and fear within his heart, "For I don't understand what I am doing. For I do not do what I want—instead I do what I hate."

These are the kind of dilemmas, and far greater ones, that we will be facing on a regular basis for some time to come as we hold the tensions created by the uncertainty, fear and turmoil of these times. And yet, even from our virtual vantage points I invite you to sing your Hosanna's anyway and wave your palms in acknowledgment that Jesus continues to ride into our city as he did so many centuries ago in Jerusalem.

We wave our palms of love when our neighbors, friends, and friends reach out to us—even from afar.

We wave our palms of love when we see the compassion of healthcare workers bring healing into the world and serving the most vulnerable despite the risks.

We wave our palms of love when technology makes communication possible when it would otherwise be impossible.

We wave our palms of love when much needed medical supplies arrive by military personnel and other means.

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We wave our palms of love when bishops write letters to governors passionately advocating for the unsheltered to receive assistance.

We wave our palms of love when musicians lift-up our hearts with their music.

We wave our palms of love when Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and other faiths come together and unite in prayer.

Dear friends, it is times such as these that reveal the true condition of our souls and whether we will allow Jesus to ride into the gates of hearts or will we close the gate, put away our palms, close our doors and let Jesus ride right on past us? It is times like these that we look around us with open eyes and despite all the fear, confusion, we boldly proclaim, "Hosanna, anyway! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Amen.