

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
Palm Sunday; 3.27.21
Zech. 9:9-12; Phil. 2:5-11;
Mk 11:1-11.

PRISONERS OF HOPE

My dear friends it is so wonderful to see you here as we note the official opening of our church for in-person worship and the beginning of Holy Week. I hope I am not the only one here that is having difficulty navigating the wide mixture of emotions that this day brings. I love you. I have missed you. I am so glad you are here. I am hopeful we have turned a corner. Because this has truly been such an emotional rollercoaster this past year and the Lentiest lent we have ever lented, there is a big part of me that wishes we could advance directly to Easter Go, collect, and pool our stimulus checks, and throw the biggest party Medina has ever seen!

But most importantly, your presence here this morning—physically, spiritually, or virtually-- confirms that we are still here for each other, have always been here for each other, and will continue to be here for each other through the coming months. No doubt, we will continue to travel an uncertain, yet hopeful journey, to a new life made possible through our faith in Jesus Christ who has come to save and guide us. Jesus who is with us always and promises to guide us through the most difficult and challenging of passageways so that we might find new life, and a new way of manifesting love in our world—despite it all!

It is human nature to always look for a passageway even when there appears to be none. A famous local story of this is that of Deception Pass. As many of you know, Deception Pass is a dramatic and extremely narrow passageway in north Puget sound that separates Whidbey Island from Fidalgo Island and the mainland. It connects Skagit bay with the Strait of Juan de Fuca. When Captain George Vancouver and his crew of sailors first attempted to explore and map the area in 1792, they were convinced there was no passageway at all—at total dead end. And so, when the passageway was finally discovered they felt they had been initially deceived into thinking Whidbey Island was a peninsula rather than a true island—hence the name Deception Pass. If any of them had thought to consult with the Salish Indian Tribe who had lived there for thousands of years, they could have been spared the ordeal. That, of course, is a subject for another sermon at another time.

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I have an early childhood memory of my family waiting patiently on our small power boat right at the entrance to the pass below the towering two bridges waiting for just the right current to change direction so we might be able to dart quickly through it hoping against hope that our engine would not die before we the large whirlpools, cross currents and roiling eddies could throw us against the rocks. To this day you can see boaters, even kayakers, waiting patiently for an opportunity to cross. I bet they have all developed a rich and robust prayer life and their prayers are likely some version of “God please save us!” I suspect there are few atheists at Deception Pass.

Today we begin voyage of our own, a week of holy observances, that is also full of currents that can pull us in opposite, conflicting, and confusing directions and yet lead us to surprising discoveries about God, each other, and ourselves. We begin the voyage with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as a king crowned with humility rather than shining swords and armor. Through the week to come we will encounter crowds with conflicting agendas—just like today--one will welcome him, and another will crucify him. Some of Jesus’ followers and friends will stay by him, even take up a cross for him, and others will betray, deny, and disappoint him. His disciples will expect to share a Passover meal with their beloved Rabbi only to hear Jesus say abruptly and unexpectedly to them as he blesses the bread and the wine: “This is my body that is given for you,” and “This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood.” Additionally, the least likely to be saved—the thief on the cross and the centurion—will also find and manifest hope.

Yes, the Holy Week drama—with all of the conflicting, confusing, and even contradictory feelings, thoughts, decisions, impulses, and cross-currents—will all have room to belong and live. It creates a dangerous, yet exciting, passageway for all of us to cross. We cannot easily escape once we enter the current—like entering the waters of baptism. We seek to accept that all of these parts of the Holy Week story belong to us and are part of our own way back to a deeper, richer relationship with God. Today, we begin with a first step, a simple “Hosanna” which means “God save us!” It may be a desperate yell from a boat on Deception Pass or a moment of spontaneous joy and praise muffled by the masks we still need to wear. Often our Hosanna is a simple acknowledgment that God has arrived and is knocking on the cabin door no matter what crew we belong to, whatever sin or error in judgment we have committed, whatever current of fear, doubt, or dread we find ourselves navigating in—including the struggle to understand why God has allowed such suffering to enter our world.

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This was very recently brought home to me yesterday when I was writing my sermon. Out of the blue, I received an emergency phone call from a parishioner from several years ago sent out a distress call to St. Thomas because her ship was sinking. Her beloved partner was dying from Covid and would I help support her in making the painful decision to turn off the ventilator to end his suffering and hers and facilitate her loved one's passageway into new life.

This couple's journey is now part of our Holy Week. It reminds all of us to look for the new life that healing in all of its forms brings. The arrival of healing is God's answer to our Hosannas. We pray for (and forgive as we are able): the cranky, acting out child and spouse; presidents, governors, and medical authorities giving contradictory messages about vaccines and Covid safety protocols; churches, and schools too slow to open back up and too quick to open back up; employers making reasonable and unreasonable demands upon their employees; and friends who have disappointed, frustrated, and comforted us. All of this, and more, are part of the Holy Week story and our stories as well. Jesus shows us how to meet each and every part of the human experience with grace and the hope of finding a way through the narrow, hazardous, mysterious, and transforming passageways in life.

In the spirit of the prophet Zechariah, may all of us this Holy Week become "prisoners of hope" from which we cannot escape however narrow the passageway. Praise be to God who will save us and help us live out the breadth and depth of our Hosannas: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the very highest." Amen.

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