

Natalie W. Bell
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 Palm and Passion Sunday

Palm Reading: Luke 19:29-40

²⁹ When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

***Passion Reading
 Luke 23:1-5, 13-47***

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.

2 They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."

3 Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so."

4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man."

5 But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people,

14 *and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him*

15 *Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.*

16 *I will therefore have him flogged and release him."*

17

18 *Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!"*

19 *(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.*

20 *Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again;*

21 *but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!"*

22 *A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him."*

23 *But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.*

24 *So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.*

25 *He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.*

26 *As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.....*

32 *Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.*

33 *When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

34 *[Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."] And they cast lots to divide his clothing.*

35 *And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"*

36 *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine*

37 *and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"*

38 *There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews.*

39 *One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*

40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,

45 while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

47 When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Today is known as ***Palm AND Passion Sunday***,
because ***both*** are pivotal parts of Holy Week—
Jesus' ***entrance*** into Jerusalem, waved by Palm branches,
and his ***crucifixion***.

I think it's hard to ***truly appreciate*** the miracle of Easter
without observing the entire Holy week!

This whole week is so important,
because Jesus enters Jerusalem for the most powerful week of his life.
And we learn in this week—
That death comes before ***resurrection***,
And the cross comes before the empty tomb!

So today we hear ***BOTH stories***—
the PALM,
and the PASSION.

And I believe we ***really NEED these stories today***,
Especially in the midst of this global pandemic of COVID-19.
We need these stories because we are ***ALL suffering*** right now.

It is an unprecedented time for us,
We are not in the church building,
To see the children waving palms,
Or hear the moving music.

We are not here to hug, or shake hands, or offer our smiles and love in person to one another during this Holy week.

And our ***Hearts are broken*** from the physical isolation we are all experiencing, from the stay at home orders we are under.
 Our hearts are broken because we turn on the news,
 and we see that more people are dying,
 first responders are getting sick,
 Hospitals are strained.
 Schools, and graduations are canceled,
 Weddings are called off,
 Funerals are postponed.
 And we are all starting to be personally touched by people who have this virus.

We need the PALM story.

Because we need to know that even in our pain and struggle,
 Jesus comes into Jerusalem, and he comes into our hearts!
 Isn't that a promise you need to hear?

Nothing can stop Jesus from coming—even as we worship from our sofas instead of our pews.
 Jesus still comes to us.
 It may be different, or quieter,
 We may be teary, or whispering, instead of shouting or singing,
 But still he comes to us—today, right now.
 Jesus comes to us in the midst of our grief and sorrow---
 and meets us wherever we are, wherever we have been,
 and he alone knows where we are going.

We need the ***PASSION story as well.***
 They go together.

Jesus ***has told his disciples*** all along
 that he would go into Jerusalem, but then, be killed.
 I doubt they understood on Palm Sunday
 what would happen ***with those same crowds*** just a few days later, right?

Watching Jesus coming into Jerusalem would be kind of like us
 at a **parade** or a rally for a returning hero.
 The disciples may have been thinking—
 This is the kind of Savior we've been waiting for,
 the kind of **reception Jesus deserves!**
 Everyone waving palm branches that day would have been **feeling great.**

Which is one of the things that is so incredible about Palm Sunday.
 Jesus enters Jerusalem with shouts of blessing and hope,
 to people praising God.

But they don't understand that his **love, will COME FROM A CROSS,**
 from His blood being shed, to take away our sin!

The question is—do we understand that—today?

Jesus comes into Jerusalem surrounded by people adoring him,
 In all his **power**---and **we see his power.**
 He knows exactly where to send them for a donkey,
 so he would arrive just as the prophets foretold.
 He knows the response of the crowds, even before it happens.

Some of the Pharisees tell Jesus,
"Teacher, order your disciples to stop."
 Jesus tells them,
I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.
 In other words, **You can't stop this**, no one can—the crowd, the procession,
 and everything else that's about to happen.

This is ALL, all of it, a part of God's plan, a plan for us—
 A plan for our **hope, and salvation.**

So we see Jesus in all his glory on Palm Sunday,
 but **we know what awaits him, don't we?**

On Thursday night, **Maundy Thursday**,
 he will eat his Last Supper and wash his disciples' feet.

Late that night he will pray in the **Garden of Gethsemane**,

asking God to take away the cup of suffering,
 He will be arrested, as an innocent man,
 and turned over to the authorities by one of his own disciples, Judas.

On Good Friday he will be ***tortured, crucified, and he will die on a cross—***
 that hideous capital punishment of the Romans—
 and that, between two common criminals.

And yet, he will do what we think unimaginable.
 Jesus will ***offer forgiveness*** for the crowds,
 and ***grace*** for a criminal, even as he dies.

This Passion of Jesus,
 This journey to the cross,
 It couldn't be more important than it is right now, in 2020.

How ***many of you have been afraid*** this week?
 How many of you have ***cried?***
 Have you turned on the news, only to quickly turn it off?
 I know I have.

There is ***more than enough fear and anxiety and depression***
 to go around, isn't there?
 My sister is an ER doc in NYC, my husband a firefighter here,
 My family mourns the loss of my father just two weeks ago.
 And my church members are all like family, so precious to me,
 and so vulnerable in a time like this.
You have worries, and fears too, right?

This story of Jesus' suffering, of the Palms and the Passion,
It is personal.
And it is powerful.
And, we need it.

I remember watching the movie Mel Gibson's movie,
The Passion of the Christ, about the life and death of Jesus.
 It was so touching to see the love of Jesus' mother Mary,
 But it was so harrowing to watch the arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus,
 in all its detail.

I almost couldn't stand to be in that theater.
 And yet the story is a story that I need.
That we all NEED.

Because our Savior is ***a Savior who suffered.***
 And it is in his suffering, it is by his stripes according to Isaiah 53,
 that we are healed.
 That we are saved from our sins.
 It is in the cross that we find our hope and our strength.

It was NOT just a horrific death,
***It was the love of God shown forth for all of us—
 the love of God defeating all sin, and death!***

That may sound crazy to our world, or to those without faith in Christ,
 But to us it is not foolishness, it is the wisdom and power of God.

This story of the Palms and the Passion is a story
That speaks to the power of fear.
 And we all know about fear, don't we?

Fear leads Jesus to be arrested, accused, tortured, and crucified!
 He was an innocent man, put to death in the most horrible way.
 A way meant to make others afraid of Rome.

Yet throughout the entire ordeal, ***Jesus is NOT afraid.***
 He asks God to take the cup from him in the Garden,
 but prays, *not my will, but thine be done.*
 He ***stands courageously*** before Pilate, before the crowds,
 not even trying to defend himself,
 or avoid what awaits him.

Jesus ***takes***—the beating, the flogging, the accusations, the mocking, and
 finally being nailed---to a wooden cross.
 And what does he do?
 He ***prays*** for the crowds,
Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
 And he promises a criminal on his side,
today you will be with me in Paradise.

He bravely breathes his last while praying:
"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit".

Can you even ***imagine***—that kind of ***courage***?
 Isn't that something we all need—right now?

I believe we can ***learn so much*** from Jesus' ministry—
 his teaching, preaching, and healing.
 But we also learn so much from his last hours on earth.
 We see in him an ***EXAMPLE of living WITHOUT fear***—
 with courage and hope, even in the most troubled times!

Think about that—
Pilate was the epitome of a fearful man—
 who gave into the demands of the crowd,
 knowing full well that Jesus was innocent!
 But Pilate was afraid—of what would they do to him, if he didn't crucify Jesus!

I wonder---what about us?
In this time of fear?
Will we allow FEAR to rule in our hearts and minds?
 Or do we stand on Paul's promise in 2 Timothy 1:7:
God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and sound mind!

The power of Jesus ***is a DIFFERENT kind of power***, isn't it?
 It isn't the power of force, or fear.

It's the power we find in Philippians 2:1-11—
 the power of ***humility, and service, and love***.
 A power that comes from ***following God's call***,
 no matter what comes our way.

It's the power that comes ***from love, not force,***
from grace, not violence.
 it's the power of a ***sound mind***—
 or as Paul puts it so eloquently in Philippians 2,
 it's the power of having the ***same mind as Jesus***.

When we think about what that means,
 To live with the mind of Christ---
Doesn't that mean living without being a slave to fear?

We have this ***example of Jesus---***
 going all the way to the cross,
 And of his crucifixion—defeating all sin and death.

And what do we learn from that?
 We learn about the power of ***FAITH OVER FEAR.***
 Of ***courage and love*** over sin and death.

What if, in our fears, in our suffering, in our struggles,
God IS saying to us,
 Those words that appear thousands of times in the Bible?
DO NOT FEAR
I AM WITH YOU.

What if we can ***live WITHOUT fear controlling us?***
 What if we can have Christ's ***courage, and hope***, even in these troubled times?
 What if our Faith can be stronger than our fear?

I believe it can.
 I believe Jesus comes to give courage to us, in this Holy Week.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel this day:***
 We can ***live afraid*** of what is happening all around us,
 Or we can ***live in the courage and hope,***
 of God's awesome hand upon us,
 and Jesus' presence right beside us,
 walking with us each and every day.

He knows about suffering---he has been there.
 But he also knows the victory over all of it.
 As we walk through this Holy Week, may we surrender our fear,
 And accept His courage and strength.
 And to that, all God's people said: Amen!