

04-05-2020 Palm Sunday

Morning Prayer -Pastor Caleb

Lord, Save us!

In the past we've prayed out of habit. Or without completely knowing why we were doing it. We liked nice-sounding words. In the season of Covid-19 that is upon us we are thrust into a new moment. Prayers really seem to matter.

We are in a unique moment because almost all humans right now have basically the same prayer.

We are afraid. We are afraid of losing work or income. We are afraid of disease. We are afraid of losing loved ones. We struggle with the uncertainty of upended plans. How long will we have to stay at home? When will things return to normal? Will there be a normal again?

These are times when we feel the urgency of praying, "save us!" Maybe in our moment, we can actually relate to the crowds that celebrated Jesus' arrival on a donkey, but carried their own anxiety waiting for the Messiah to liberate them.

Yet, you know better than we do what we truly need. Help us to hear your still, small voice.

While we carry our own anxieties and fears, help us to find space to recognize how this virus impacts others, especially those who were already vulnerable.

We think of those who can't work from home – who are putting themselves at risk in order to offer essential services: for delivery drivers, grocery clerks, plumbers or people in home maintenance, for caregivers.

We pray for health care workers and first-responders – those being exposed to the virus by virtue of doing their jobs. Grant that your Holy Spirit would give increased wisdom, energy, clear-headed decision making and compassion.

We pray for the homeless. For folks without food security or any savings to fall back on. For victims of domestic violence.

We pray for asylum seekers who are now quickly turned away. We pray for undocumented immigrants who are disproportionately in jobs that put them at risk of infection, providing essential services while having to fear seeking medical attention.

We pray for poorer countries of the world that don't have the health care capacity to handle serious cases.

We also pray for concerns closer to home.

We pray for those in our church and community that feel isolated and alone in this time of CoVid-19 distancing. Help us all to find energy and hope for each day.

We pray for those in our church and community facing unemployment or worried about unemployment.

We pray for families juggling responsibilities for childcare and homeschooling, while also trying to work.

We pray for Myron Schmidt as he recovers from surgery this past Thursday. We thank God that the surgery went well and ask for God's continued mercy and healing.

We know that in a time of crisis, there is much to be thankful for.

We thank you for the ways we are becoming clearer on priorities. We thank you for the opportunity to strengthen family relationships. We thank you for the strength we can draw from each other, knowing we are facing the same challenges and worries.

While keeping physical distance, we are becoming closer.

Just as your power transformed the worse that evil could do to your Son Jesus, we pray for eyes to see how you will transform this crisis.

In Jesus' name, Amen

Sermon – Pastor Lois

What a motley parade! Everything about this scenario was contrary to what was expected. The Jewish people were waiting for, anticipating, expecting a Messiah, a King! They were back under the thumb of a foreign power again, just like they'd been in Egypt hundreds of years before, and they wanted to be liberated – now from the oppression of the Romans who maintained “peace through power”.

And this was a time when the Romans felt a special need to flex their powerful muscles in order to keep the peace. It was the High Holy days for the Jewish folks and things were tense. The crowds were pouring into Jerusalem for the celebration, so what was already a big, bustling city had become a crowded and potentially riotous scene. In fact, in verse 10 when it says “...the whole city was in turmoil...” that word could also be tumult or trembling, like an earthquake – the conflicts between Jesus and the religious authorities had been mounting for quite some time already and Rome would need to ratchet up their security detail if they wanted to keep things under control. There was a tenuous “understanding” between the Roman government and the Jewish religious leadership. The Romans agreed to allow the Jewish leaders to keep their religious laws and traditions as long as they kept the common folks in their places, common and poor, paying the Roman taxes and giving their allegiance to Caesar.

Which was why it was particularly troubling, of course, to have the crowd yelling, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Those cheers were fightin' words. ‘Hosanna’ means, ‘save us’! That is clearly the sort of thing people would holler at someone they thought *could* save them – someone they were looking to for leadership, protection, salvation. To call him the Son of David was an unequivocal placement in the line of David, recognizing the prophetic fulfilment of his family tree. And to bless this prophet from tiny Nazareth in Galilee (no-where's-ville) and say that he had come in the name of the Lord... well, that was flying in the face of Caesar's regime who insisted that he alone be referred to as lord, with a small ‘l’; they were talking about Yahweh, the Lord God, maker of heaven and earth.

But this Jesus, this rabbi was also a common man who worked with his hands. And he gathered up the strangest group of followers – fishermen and tax collectors and women, and those who had been ill but he had healed them. He was a most unlikely leader of a movement and he did almost everything in unexpected ways. For instance, he showed his power through compassion and servanthood. His lordship was shown in gentleness and humility. He most clearly embodied God’s presence in the world. He showed that in God’s kingdom the world’s business does not continue as usual. He didn’t come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey in order to just leave things as they were. And he taught his followers that peace and reconciliation are possible when common people with uncommon courage stand together and act together in the name of God.

All of this made him a very real threat to the powers of the political and religious establishments of the time. The people were with him. He had taught them and shown them that they mattered to God, that God loved them and valued them and that together – in committed community, God could work with them and through them. In this Palm Sunday moment, the great city of Jerusalem was faced with a question – what would it do with a Messiah who brings a reign of peace and not of warfare? What would she do with a prophet who cares for her deeply, like a mother hen cares for her brood?

We, who have 2,000 years of hindsight know that these questions, these opportunities for making a different choice, only lasted a moment in the grand scheme of time. But if we listen carefully to the story of the palms, we can feel the possibility; it’s a combination of fear, excitement, the Holy Spirit blowing the wind of change, the energy of a movement when the universe teetered on the edge of ushering in the kingdom of love. We know that the palms gave way to the passion. But for these moments, let’s linger with the “Hosanna!”.

We can think of other “hosanna” movements and opportunities – in Jerusalem, but in other parts of God’s world as well. Remember the men and women of the Underground Railroad, leading brothers and sisters to freedom, out of enslavement. Think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in the 1930’s whose loyalty was to Jesus and not to Hitler and the Nazis. Think of Nelson Mandela and the young people in South Africa who stood against apartheid. Remember MJ Sharp and his companion, Zaida Catalan who worked tirelessly through the United Nations to bring peace to the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo. They used the surprising and disarming tools of Jesus – showing genuine care, savvy wisdom and sacrificial love. Just two weeks ago we observed the third year since their murder.

There are many other examples of Palm Sunday moments when humanity has glimpsed the empire of God. Maybe we’re hovering, teetering on one of those edges now. We can certainly identify this as a time when, as a planet we’re fearful, uncertain, and crying out, “Hosanna! Save us!” With the coronavirus ravaging the population, the climate behaving in ways we’ve never seen before, the chasm between the very wealthy and the very poor wide and getting wider, I wonder if now may be a Palm Sunday opportunity? The time and the experience that we’re going through right now is different than any we’ve ever known. In the midst of our fear, our grief, as we wonder what life will look like on the other side of this crisis, let us wave our palm branches. Let us grasp firmly our faith in God, cling tightly to one another, trust in the humble triumph of Jesus, try to be attentive to the Holy Spirit winds of change, and as we’re able, usher in God’s kingdom.