

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church
Palm Sunday
3/24/2024
Luann Yutzy

Eyes of Tears

Matthew 21:1-11

It was one of those days... where the sun was out in the morning and the clouds just kept coming in from the west, slowly and when the wind picked up, the clouds moved faster becoming a low ceiling of gray, with threats. The forecast for the week ahead was to be less light each day until total darkness on the weekend in the middle of the afternoon. Unusual weather patterns. We know about this kind of weather.

It's time to slow down and notice and listen. It would be a week of lasts. The last time to weep for what could have been, "Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, if you had only recognized the things that make for peace." The last time to laugh and share life with family, looking into his mother's eyes knowing it would be the last time. "Thank you for being so brave and carrying the son of God when it was scandalous and risky, Mother Mary."

The last time to eat with friends and a time to be betrayed by a friend, "Do quickly what you are going to do, Judas." The long last mile on the way to Jerusalem, to the cross, his face was determined.. He can hear the sirens in the distance and he quickens his pace and walks with purpose and resolve into the approaching storm.

If you look closely, though, you can see there are tears in his eyes.

It's a week before Passover, the most important annual festival of the Jews and Jesus was arriving from the east on a donkey or two, (vs. 7 says he sat on them) symbols of peace. The streets are crowded with pilgrims from all over the Jewish world, coming to take part in the festival and remember their salvation history where the Lord God brought them out of the land of slavery in Egypt and was their deliverer and provider as they wandered in the wilderness learning to not abandon God and learning to let go of Egypt.

And the whole city was shaken, it says in Matthew 21:10, coming from the Greek where the English word seismic comes from as in violent shakings of the earth. The city was in turmoil.

"Save us now! Hosanna!" The people gathered couldn't keep quiet. So much dedication and excitement that some of the Pharisees asked Jesus to quiet them down. The city was shaking as they came face to face with the Messiah.

This happens again and again in Jesus' life, this disturbing of the balance of powers that be and upsetting the normal equilibrium.

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It happened when the Magi came to Herod and asked him where the child was, who had been born King of the Jews? We want to worship him. And Herod and all of Jerusalem were frightened and stirred.

It will appear again in the Passion narrative that is just beginning in our scripture today when at Jesus' death, he cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn in two and the earth shook. And again when the guards at the tomb of Jesus saw that the stone was rolled away and the angel of the Lord was sitting on it, the guards shook with fear when they saw the angel and became like dead men.

We go back to the parade coming in from the back gates of the city which is almost comical, Jesus straddling a donkey or two, riding with the intention of the kind of King he was, a king of Peace. The carpet of coats and tree branches are strewn before him. Throwing down a cloak was a display of commitment and respect. Some people would have thrown down the only coat they owned. They were removing a part of their normal attire in public. A vulnerable act.

It would be like someone who only owned the clothes on their back, taking off their coat in cold weather to aid in the comfort of someone else who has come for their salvation.

Did the crowds really get it? I'm not sure. They said he was a prophet from Nazareth.

"Hosanna," "Save us now," is what Hosanna means. An older man shouts, "Hosanna," as he lays his dusty coat down. You can see it in his eyes, his hands letting go of the coat and grasping for hope in a terrible and beautiful world. "Save me now, Jesus." "Who are you? Could you be the one?"

Frederick Buechner writes: "Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take — despair at what in our madness we are bringing down on our own heads and hope in him who travels the road with us and for us and who is the only one of us all who is not mad."

It is believed that while Jesus was arriving from the east; Pilate was parading on a war horse, a symbol of domination and empire from the opposite side of the city. He was flanked by a squadron of Roman soldiers, a symbol of power and strength to subdue any unruliness that might happen from festival-goers. Two different displays of how to use power.

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I think Pope Francis was the one who told his clergy they must smell like sheep if they were to follow Jesus, the Shepherd. Spend your days out in the world caring for all, the rich and the poor alike. Be among them, smell like them. Follow the Shepherd King who is willing to lay his life down for the sheep.

Jesus was walking straight into the eye of a storm.

Yet his life had been a storm waiting to happen. Jesus had always been a rebel, getting in trouble for his inclusive table practices, the people on the margins he hung out with and Jesus was in conflict with the temple at times. Jesus overturned the money changers' tables, protesting the temple's role in oppression and being a part of a domination system that took advantage of often the poor and the widows. The temple had become an institution that didn't see the people.

So when any of us become activists (promoting a particular stand for something) we have to be firmly rooted in who Christ was- the humble King who always *saw* the people. He wasn't taking a stand because he hated a person, or he wanted to fight against something. Jesus lived and died *for people*, not an issue. He was living out of who he was -a vulnerable and compassionate leader, God Incarnate who steadily and endlessly was the Peoples' King. He kept his eyes on us.

And those eyes were eyes with the hint of tears, remember. It won't end well for Jesus, we know that now. This was another marker in his life, this kind of absurd parade with a power of its own that shook the city to its core. Murmurs of "Who is this," could be heard throughout the crowd. He's the prophet from Nazareth. "

"No, who really is this?"

Was his life all he had hoped for? Had he taken all the opportunities he could to show what it meant to be a shalom community where everyone had what they needed and all were included?

Had he had enough time?

Had he laughed as much as he wanted to in his 30 years?

Did he build something that would last?

The world was swirling around him and a storm was brewing. You could smell it in the air.

So many questions, so little time.

Did he have any regrets?

Some of you might have seen the old faithful cottonwood tree that is still standing in our yard, triumphing over one of the best tree-cutting equipment around these parts. She's still towering over us with her

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defiance. She was just too tall to reach. It's very hard to look out at her, full of so many stories and having seen so much in the past hundreds of years and now armless.

I had a lot of sadness the week I thought the tree was coming all the way down last year and someone helped me see it isn't just the tree being cut down that causes my tears. I had a lot of losses in my life and they started to name them. This person knows me well. Death in our extended family, a young niece, loss of relationship because of distance, death of my mother, chronic illness in relatives, children struggling with balance of vocations and how much is enough, a world that is changing so fast around me, violence again and again. My tears were for the world, for people I love and the tree, and that at some time our life here is over.

Was it all that I hoped for? Am I focusing on the important things? Did I keep my eyes on people?

Do I laugh enough?

Did I stand in solidarity with people who others don't need and won't recognize as part of us?

Jesus did that. Jesus declared solidarity with those who were abandoned and oppressed, misunderstood, mocked, accused when he said. "My god, my god why have you forsaken me?" He used the journey to the cross to be an opportunity of hospitality and communion for all people.

In the swirl of the storm, in the shaking of the earth, Jesus stayed true to who he was.

Have *we* really gotten it though? Did we ever have the freshness wash over us of who Jesus is.

We are waving our branches one minute, laying down our coats and we yell, "Crucify him," soon after.

Listen. We can still hear the horns and the shouts for Pilate on the other side of the city. Have the delusions of empire become so much a part of us that we cannot and will not accept a leader who came to empty himself, not because he had to but because he wanted to... for us... for all? Is it one of those times we cannot accept something so beautiful and pure because we just can't recognize it. We resist the love offered to us. We think we don't deserve it. Empire feels safe and tangible and familiar.

Put down your branch and just stand still and silent... and look. Jesus is passing by on a donkey. Look at his face, his eyes. We can trust him. His eyes have seen it all.

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Markers in life will always happen. When we feel that tug, that tear, that laughter that comes from deep within, we are being human beyond our circumstance while we are in our circumstance. We can hold it all at the same time and it helps to have each other.

Recently I heard of the Jewish law or mishnah that is 2000 years old “that instructs pilgrims on their visit to the temple in Jerusalem. After climbing up the steps to the Temple Mount, when they come to an arched entryway and pass through it into a courtyard there is a turn to the right or left. Usually people will go to the right and move around the edges of the courtyard and then exit the way they came in. But there were different instructions for pilgrims arriving at the temple “brokenhearted.” These pilgrims climbed the stairs like all the others and passed under the same arch, but they were to turn left to begin their circle around the courtyard.

When these pilgrims traveling in opposite directions inevitably met, the person coming from the right was to ask, “What has happened to you?” And the brokenhearted one was to share the reason for their sorrow. After listening, the pilgrim from the right was to give a blessing to the person who had told their story, then each continued on their way.”¹

I had some friends that came and visited and sat or walked with me that day the chainsaw came out to cut the tree in our front yard. The day I thought it would come all the way down. They probably knew it wasn't just the tree they were sitting vigil for. We were sitting vigil for our lives in this world that doesn't always know the way of Jesus and the kingdom he ushered in. The kingdom that Mary, a very wise woman said before he was born, this Messiah will prepare a way where the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things. He will give light to those of us who can't get out of the shadows sometimes and will show us how to live the ways of peace. It is all there for us to see how to live our lives now if we pay attention and see the signs along the way. To remember to do the important things in life. Keep our eyes on the One whose feet were dragging close to the ground on a young donkey, this One is the God who watches the sheep in the night. He can be trusted with our lives. He smells like us.

Can you sense it? A storm is brewing. There he goes past the crowds still cheering.
They don't know yet.

He won't beat the odds this time. He will keep walking toward the eye of the storm to the humiliation of the cross with determination, vulnerability and courage, his eyes never wavering on what he was looking for.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/march-24-palm-sunday-b-mark-11-1-11>

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Eyes filled with love and compassion for all the world. God so loved the world.

He kept his eyes right on us. He was looking right at us.

Jesus, The Peoples' King.

“Hosanna...”

Amen.

Benediction blessing:

Blessed is the one
who comes to us
by the way of love
poured out with abandon.

Blessed is the one
who walks toward us
by the way of grace
that holds us fast.

Blessed is the one
who calls us to follow
in the way of blessing,
in the path of joy.

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