

April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

“Revere: *The Dance of Palm Sunday*”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Matthew 21:1-11

Today is a celebration. It’s a day when we revere Jesus. We, like those crowds long ago, show him admiration and respect. The children reenacted that parade on the streets of Jerusalem, which welcomed Jesus. We sang and shouted “Hosanna” like the people in the city did. We all waved our branches and imagined that cloaks lined the ground. For Presbyterians, this day is about as close as we get to dancing in the aisles.

Gertrud Mueller Nelson opens her book on rituals and celebrations with a story about her daughter, Annika. While Gertrud spent a long afternoon engrossed in a sewing project, three year old Annika created a project of her own. She started digging around in her mom’s basket of sewing scraps. She pulled out long strips of fabric, some shiny, some patterned, some brightly colored. Out in the backyard Annika found a long stick. She gathered her fabric, tape, and the stick and set to work. When Gertrud finally found her daughter, Annika was deep into her project, attaching the fabric strips to the top of the stick with big wads of sticky tape. She told her mom, “I’m making a banner for a procession...I need a procession so that God will come down and dance with us.”¹ Then she stood up and put her streamers into the air and began to dance.

It must have been one of those moments when a parent is struck dumb by the poignancy of their child’s actions. The little girl paired her reverence for God with a holy kind of playfulness. What Annika wanted was for the presence of God to surround her. She asked God to come and celebrate alongside her. With her streamers, she made something beautiful and special to celebrate the holy one.

The people in Jerusalem must have felt like that when they welcomed Jesus. They wanted him to come and dance alongside them. They called on God to save them - that’s what hosanna means. It was a day of celebration and honoring Jesus. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” they shouted. Their streamers were palm branches. They were earnest in their desire for God to be with them and to help them in their life of struggle.

Annika’s homemade streamer reminds me of Palm Sunday in 2020. We were in the earliest days of Covid-induced pre-recorded worship services taped in the living rooms of our staff members. We were not supposed to be

¹ Gertrud Mueller Nelson, *To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 3..

² Jan Richardson, “Palm Sunday: Where the Way Leads,” *The Painted Prayerbook*, March 14, 2008, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/03/14/palm-sunday-where-the-way-leads/>

³ Scott Dalgarno, “Mr. Wiesel, can there be any meaning in suffering?” *Presbyterian Outlook*, December 15, 2022.

leaving our homes at all, except to go to the grocery store. Everyday, we were calling on God to save us from the strange and terrible pandemic. That year, the congregation was invited to make a palm to wave at home. My family used green construction paper and traced our hands. We attached the cutouts to popsicle sticks to wave in the air like palms. My daughter, age four at the time, even made a how-to video for others to watch on Facebook. All of us paraded around our living room singing, “All glory, laud, and honor, to thee redeemer king!” For me, those memories are precious and awful all at the same time. We were only a few weeks into what would become such a defining time in our lives. The kids were having fun, but had no real understanding of the awful situation that was causing us to be at home. Those memories from three years ago contain seeds of hope and joy - at our resourcefulness, at our refusal to give in to the worry and the loneliness. But they also make me feel like mourning - for the people who died and for what we lost in our sense of community.

That’s the fuller story of Palm Sunday, anyway. It is a day for hope and a day for mourning. We celebrate the joy of Jesus’ presence - the promise of his ministry, the notion that he can indeed save us. And we mourn that the saving he brings is not always what we imagine, nor what the people lining the streets of Jerusalem imagined. They hoped for a military victory, someone to throw off the yoke of the Roman occupiers. They got a savior who died on a cross. We mourn for what we know is just a few days away for Jesus: a last supper with his disciples, being arrested for crimes he did not commit, an unfair trial, and execution by the government. We know that Easter follows all that, too. So our hope and mourning are all twisted up together.

Artist and poet Jan Richardson reflects on the Palm Sunday story. She writes, “For those who know the rest of the story... there is an eerie note to the cries of the crowd. The way of palms will lead to the way of the passion, a path marked by shouts of accusation and a collective demand for Jesus’ death, a path traced in blood.”³ There is a painful undercurrent just below the surface on Palm Sunday. It is not only a day of dancing and celebration. That was true in 2020, and it’s true every year. We know that suffering is coming. And that makes us uncomfortable, mournful, worried. What are Christians to do with that feeling?

The Rev. Scott Dalgarno has been a Presbyterian pastor for many years. When he was a young college student in 1976, Elie Wiesel visited with students at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. Wiesel was a holocaust survivor. The rest of his family members were murdered by the Nazis in concentration camps. His profound writing about that genocide and his raw, honest wrestling about it in the context of his Jewish faith have shaped the understanding of many people since. Scott was among a small group of students in the campus ministry who got to have a more private conversation with Wiesel. Scott remembers that he was young, direct, and a bit clueless

back then. So he went ahead and asked a question he’d been pondering for a long time. “Mr. Wiesel, can there be any meaning in suffering?”²

The campus pastor did not approve of Scott’s question. To think there would be anything redeeming about seeing every member of his family killed seemed unthinkable and insensitive to even ask. Scott says that in response, “[Wiesel] offered a quiet but emphatic ‘No!’ The things he had seen were unspeakable and unthinkable. There was no meaning to be made from murder and death. Wiesel said, “I have no choice but to reject suffering outright. It is entirely unacceptable.”

As Scott writes, “Then he paused and leaned back a little, so as to more fully take me in. “Well,” [Wiesel] added, “that is the difference, isn’t it, between your Christian faith and my own [Jewish] tradition?” Scott didn’t know what to say. He has spent much of his career in ministry since wondering about that answer.

Wiesel’s answer seems so telling for us, on this Palm Sunday, leading us to the suffering of the cross on Friday. Scott says, “The cross — we need to account for it. A crude means of Roman torture and execution, the cross seems to be first a tragic example of what power regularly does to keep the powerless down, to silence voices that cry for justice. No statement beyond that can have any integrity unless that is stated first. But the cross has also become a beautiful and resonant symbol that has power to lift the hearts of people who long for hope in this world.”

At first glance to Christians, the cross is a symbol of salvation, good news, and hope. But we cannot forget what lies beyond that symbol: suffering, abuse of power, death. It can make us mourn, as it also turns us toward hope. That is something like the Palm Sunday procession, too.

Jan Richardson had read the story of Annika, too. She writes, “We who stand among the Palm Sunday crowds know that the Word will soon be beaten, mocked, and killed. We know, too, that that is not the end of the tale.

But we have not yet moved on to that part of the tale. This week’s Gospel lection beckons us to linger alongside the road, to lift our voices in celebration, and to ask ourselves a few questions. I find myself wondering, what is the way that I am preparing for Christ? Am I clearing a path by which he has access to my life? Am I keeping my eyes open to the variety of guises that Christ continues to wear in our world? Taking a cue from Annika, what am I lifting up, that God might come down and dance with me?”

In closing, Richardson says, “On [this] Palm Sunday, on the threshold of this Week of Weeks: blessings to you, and a pair of dancing shoes.”

And so my friends, we wave our branches. We cry out “Hosanna to the King of Kings.” We dance with God, who accompanies us when we mourn and celebrates with us as we hope. And let us lift our voices in song as we sing about the life of Jesus, the one who leads us in the dance.