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April 5, 2020
Palm/ Passion Sunday – Gospel of Matthew

This weekend, we welcome Jesus into Jerusalem for his final week - a week that we call Holy - and we follow him to the table, the trial, the cross and to the tomb. Jesus enters a city in turmoil, comes into a crowd who gives him undeniable praise and adoration with shouts of Hosanna – meaning Save us, and asking “Who is this?” “What does this mean?”

This crowd in Jerusalem was anxiously waiting for something and for someone to save them, to deliver them, to lead them, at a time when the only certain thing was uncertainty. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

The people were accustomed to Pax Romana, the way that Rome kept the peace, which was through violence, fear, and death. The act of crucifixion was invented by Pax Romana, and the only peace there was meant for Caesar and Caesar alone..

The Savior who comes before them looks different, not like the mighty king they had hoped for... not like the tyrannical empire of Rome... not like the leader Pilate who makes a grand entrance on the other side of the city.

This weeklong event of Jesus' entrance and exit, if you will, gives us a look at Jesus' defiance in the face of much needed change... since Jesus as king looked remarkably different than Caesar as king.

The people started to gather together after hearing stories of Jesus' power, his healing and his life-giving message of love, peace, and hope, of mercy, justice, and forgiveness and talk about it in their homes, with their families and loved ones, and all. Again, sounds familiar.

This is the way a faith community begins to take shape (the same way faith communities are born today); Because when Jesus comes into our lives through this story of death and resurrection, life as we know it will never be the same. And perhaps that's what was so frightening that so many changed their minds and their shouts, from Hosanna (Save us) to Crucify Him.

Perhaps, like their ancestors before them, those in Jerusalem argued like the Israelites who had been freed from slavery in Egypt, complaining about walking in the wilderness for generations, grumbling about the lack of food, water, and toilet paper on their journey to freedom... (*minus the toilet paper, of course. That was us.*)

Despite fear lingering in the hearts of the people in Jerusalem that day, God continued to work and communities of faith gathered together to watch and pray (from afar and at a distance).

Even though we aren't gathering with palms raised high and waving rapidly this year as we process en masse into our sanctuaries and worship spaces;
even though the streets and aisles between the pews won't be covered in palm branches and cloaks;
even though the presence of crowds are nearly illegal in some areas of Chicagoland and reinforced with many images of Mayor Lightfoot meme;

Jesus still enters into this city in turmoil, and into this world in its chaos and brokenness, all to share God's love and faithful relationship with us... a love so deep that it leads him to the cross.

Could it be that the fear the people of Jerusalem had that day is the same fear that resides in our hearts sometimes... that Jesus truly loves and cares for us and that we deserve to be loved.

That Jesus is the one who will risk everything for us and to be with us.

That Jesus is the one who will save others by not saving himself, not even calling on divine intervention when it went downhill too fast. Jesus is the one who will save you by not saving himself.

Now that is a terrifying thought. Who is this, that could come back from sacrificing himself, the likes of which the world has NEVER seen? That's God's love for you, embodied in God's Son, Jesus the Christ, who is willing to die for you and for our sake, to show God's love for us and redeem us from the power of death and sin!

God's love reveals to us that Jesus knows what it's like to feel that God was distant or absent in our lives. He literally knows our hurts, our pain, and our suffering because we have a Savior who knows who we are and loves us.

Jesus hears our own cry: Hosanna – Save us! Save us from disease and sickness, from unemployment and injustice. Save us from hatred and stupidity, from physical distancing and quarantine. Save us from uncertainty and unfamiliarity.

And in many ways, Jesus does that through the little Christs that are in our midst. As Martin Luther says in the theology of the cross, "We are to be little Christs to our neighbors, for in doing so, we find our true identity as children of God."

Our walkways are covered, not with palms and cloaks, but with chalk art spreading messages of hope, peace, and courage. The crowds are gathering in essential places and spaces to be of service to others in hospitals and healthcare sites, grocery stores and warehouses, and delivery and environmental, health and sanitation facilities.

These Little Christs are the ones who choose to be on the frontlines of healing, serving, teaching, caring and loving, demonstrating the life-giving power of the cross through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Strengthened by Jesus' love and grace, we wave our palms as an act of defiance against the powers of sin and death in this world today. We hear the story at the table and the passion story, shedding tears for all who suffer in body, mind or spirit, just as Jesus was betrayed, suffered and died on the cross.

We worship, gathered together as the body of Christ as a sign of hope that this is the Savior who is different from the rest and is the one for whom we wait.

Though we may feel like we are engulfed by turmoil and chaos, through it all, Jesus' love, care, and concern for us never wavers. Be of good courage, church. Our Messiah, our Redeemer, our Savior is here.

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Amen.