

Matthew 21:1-11

April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

PALMS AND A PARADE IN A PANDEMIC

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

On Thursday, March 12, the North Carolina Azalea Festival Board of Directors and Staff announced that the North Carolina Azalea Festival 2020 was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In their letter to the community, the board members wrote, “Festival Friends, we have come to the day many of us have been dreading; out of an abundance of caution we must cancel our beloved North Carolina Azalea Festival 2020. This statement comes to you with heavy hearts – the Azalea Festival has been a staple in our community for 73 years, showcasing our beautiful city, highlighting our amazing citizens, and sharing our Southern hospitality and community pride, and we hate to lose even one year of that.”

Of course, the cancellation of the 2020 North Carolina Azalea Festival means the Azalea Festival Parade, scheduled for 9:30 a.m. yesterday morning, was also canceled. The azaleas are stunning, the weather is beautiful, and peoples’ hopes were high. But it’s hard to celebrate when you’re under a stay-at-home order, even when we know it’s the right and safe thing to do for our communities.

We pastors have had a steep learning curve during the past month. I agree with my colleagues who have said, “We didn’t learn in seminary how to lead worship during a pandemic when everyone has to stay home.” In some ways, it’s particularly challenging and poignant since we are at the beginning of Holy Week. To paraphrase the letter from the Azalea Festival Board of Directors, the session sent a similar letter recently. “WPC Friends, we have come to the day many of us have been dreading; out of an abundance of caution we must cancel our beloved weekly in-person worship services. This statement comes to you with heavy hearts – weekly worship has been a staple in our church for 136 years and in the Christian community for more than 2,000 years. Communal worship is the heart of our Christian fellowship and the essence of why we were created. We hate to lose even one week of that.”

In this week’s online edition of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield writes, “I’ve been thinking about all of the large, celebratory gatherings that will not happen this spring.” She then muses on today’s Palm Sunday story: “What if Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem happened now, when many of us have to shelter in place and groups of ten or more are banned? No one would line the roads waving palms or throwing their coats on the road. Jesus plus his disciples makes for a group of thirteen, three too many for that upper room Passover meal. How would they have held the Last Supper under these circumstances? While I am unsure how these events would have

been altered, I am certain Jesus would still enter Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week would take place – different, no doubt, but unthwarted.”

She continues, “I’ve been thinking about graduations cancelled, weddings postponed, awards ceremonies, proms, festivals, concerts, jobs, even funerals that cannot go on as usual. The normal rhythms and milestone markers are gone, as time takes on an amorphous quality, simultaneously feeling as if it is flying and not moving at all. We will not gather this Sunday and parade around the church or the sanctuary waving palms. Little children will not sing Hosanna, not in the same physical space, anyway. And yet, Jesus will still enter Jerusalem. Even if the crowds do not line the highway and shout, even if only two or three can gather at home, even if we worship from our sofa instead of in our normal pews, Jesus makes it to Jerusalem.”

Many people have suggested that this different Holy Week gives us the chance to think more deeply about the meaning for our lives of what Jesus did by going into Jerusalem on that Sunday 2,000 years ago. While we may miss the excitement and the pageantry and the familiar rituals and customs this season, the meaning of Jesus’ last week of life and his death remain the same. Perhaps in this time of uncertainty, fear, and disruption of our regular schedules, we will catch a glimpse not only of the pomp of the parade but also the passion of our Lord.

Jill Duffield imagines just how this different Palm Sunday will find us. She writes, “Our Palm Sunday celebrations will no doubt be quieter, simpler, less demonstrative than we would have imagined just weeks ago, but they will not be stopped. The Son of God enters our living rooms no less than he walked the streets of Jerusalem and we still cry out to him, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’ We may want to whisper, rather than shout. Some of us may put a question mark instead of an exclamation point on the end of those proclamations. Many of us cannot help but wonder what this Savior who rides humbly on a donkey can do to help our stirred-up world. Everyone yearns to know when things will return to some semblance of normal. This Palm and Passion Sunday fills with our questions even as we strain to shout our affirmations.”¹

On the church calendar today is referred to as Palm/Passion Sunday. “Passion” means suffering, and the passion of Jesus wasn’t just his brutal beating and humiliating crucifixion on Friday. Jesus’ passion included people misunderstanding him, people abandoning him, people denying him, people betraying him, people ridiculing him. Jesus’ passion included riding into the midst of the Passover Festival, knowing full well what might and probably would happen to him. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead shortly before the Passover Festival began, some of the Jews who had gone to Jerusalem to purify themselves before the festival were looking for Jesus and asking one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?” (John 11:56) Their questions have an ominous tone and echo the disciples’ objection when Jesus announced he was going to Judea (down south, where Bethany and Jerusalem are located) to be with Lazarus’ sisters and, as it turns out, show up at the festival, riding on a donkey. The disciples were concerned and

maybe a bit put out with Jesus, so they said, “Rabbi, the Jews are just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” (John 11:8)

From the disciples’ point of view, it would have been smart for Jesus to stay-at-home and self-quarantine until the danger passed. But Jesus showed up anyway, just as he always shows up, not just in the good times and celebrations of our lives, but in the bad times, when the parades get canceled and life is turned upside down.

Some people erroneously posted online that the Pope had canceled Easter. They were indignant, and loudly proclaimed that Easter can’t be canceled. Actually, the Vatican announced that the Pope would not hold any public Easter celebrations in light of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and precautions. But, the critics were right in saying that no one can cancel Easter. In that same vein, thank God that Jesus didn’t cancel his Palm Sunday parade. Instead, as Jill Duffield reminds us, “Nothing can stop Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Nothing can stop the coming of the Son of God. Nothing can prevent Jesus from being present in the midst of all that shakes us and stirs us and causes us to tremble. Soon the earth will shake and the rocks will split and the temple curtain will be torn in two. The crowds will disappear. Even Jesus’ closest friends will abandon him. All will seem lost and dead and beyond redemption, but only for a while, for three days when time will seem to stand still. Then God will upend all our expectations yet again, and those tasked with keeping Jesus in the grave will be the ones shaken and rendered useless, because nothing can stop Easter, either.”²

Right now, when our 2020 Palm Sunday Parade has been canceled, it feels as if all seems lost and dead and beyond redemption. But still Jesus comes into our midst – right into the midst of shelter-in-place and stay-at-home orders, right into the midst of our fears and dread and uncertainty, right into the midst of our disappointments and our wondering what life will like, right into the midst of a worldwide pandemic that has revealed just how fragile our lives and the life we have built really are.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the crowd shouted, “Hosanna!” Usually on Palm Sunday we hear that as a cry of victory and praise. Originally, “Hosanna!” was used as a prayer to God, “Save us!” On this Palm Sunday 2020, as we hear again about palms and a parade in the midst of a pandemic, let us shout “Hosanna!”

“Hosanna!” Save us, Lord, in these troubling times.

“Hosanna!” Praise God that nothing can stop Jesus from coming into our lives and saving us – not even the Covid-19 pandemic.

Let us pray: Hosanna! Save us, O God. Save us from despair. Save us from hopelessness. Hosanna! Save us, O God. Save us from giving up. Save us from fear. Save us from worry. Hosanna! Save us, O God. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed are you, Lord Jesus, who came into our world as one of us, who died as one of us, and who lives again. May we seek your reign on earth as it is in heaven. Hosanna in the highest! Amen.

NOTES

¹Jill Duffield, Matthew 21:1-11 in *The Presbyterian Outlook* April 5, 2020.

²Ibid.