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To the Light, Through the Darkness: The Bare-Branched Aftermath

Our first Scripture lesson this morning comes from the book of Psalms. This is a Psalm of praise, extolling God and invited all of the gathered congregation to join in the exhortation.

Today, Palm Sunday, marks the beginning of Holy Week. We, at Westminster, typically pivot during the service from what is called the “Narrative of the Palms” to the “Narrative of the Passion.” We begin the service with a liturgical enactment of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we’ll read from the book of Matthew in just a few minutes. The children lead us with their waving palm branches, we sing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” and shout “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” It is a joyful, joyous celebration.

The Narrative of the Passion, of course, tells the story of Jesus’s death on the cross, and the events leading up to it. This is why we end the service in silence, and invite you to return for the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services later this week.

So as we begin our descent into the darkest moments of our church season, we read this Psalm of praise. Toward the end of the reading, you’ll hear the words shouted by the crowd with their palm branches waved, words that we said together in our Assurance of Pardon. You will also hear allusions to the Palm Sunday scene.

Listen now for God’s word to us from Psalm 118.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Open to me the gates of righteousness,

That I may enter through them

And give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;  
The righteous shall enter through it.  
I thank you that you have answered me  
And have become my salvation.  
The stone that the builders rejected  
Has become the cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing;  
It is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day that the Lord has made;  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!  
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.  
We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
The Lord is God,  
And he has given us light.  
Bind the vestal procession with branches,  
Up to the horns of the altar.  
You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
You are my God; I will extol you.  
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
For his steadfast love endures forever.

The word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

Palm Sunday marks the most overtly political day in the whole of our liturgical calendar. What we call the triumphal entry, Jesus riding on a donkey with palm branches waving and coats thrown ahead of him, wasn't just a spontaneous celebration. It was a major political statement.

Jesus was entering Jerusalem for one of three major festivals that took place there each year, the Festival of the Passover. The Roman authorities, for the most part, left the governance of Jerusalem to the religious authorities and didn't expend much energy or personnel to any kind of enforcement. The Festival of the Passover, however, was different.

You might remember from Sunday School or any number of films about the Exodus narrative, that the Passover celebrates God's deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians. God parts the Red Sea and

Moses leads them out of slavery and into freedom. The Exodus story has always been an inspiration to those who would seek to overthrow an unjust or occupying government, and the first century was no different.

Because of this, the Romans were on high-alert during the Festival of the Passover for any kind of activity that might signify some kind of resistance or rebellion. This is why, later in the week, you'll hear about Barabbas the insurrectionist being freed instead of Jesus.

The Hebrew religious authorities in Jerusalem were aligned with the Romans because while they certainly didn't *want* any kind of empirical oversight, they had an arrangement that they liked, generally being left alone and unbothered. But since there was often antiestablishment activity during this time, the religious authorities were quick to quell it for the sake of their own self-interests.

And so, when Jesus enters Jerusalem and the crowds lay down their coats the way they would for the emperor and gather and cry out "Hosanna" to their king, the Romans take notice. Hosanna was an acclamation of praise reserved for leaders of the Roman Empire. It was dangerous to say it about someone else, especially during this already tense time. It becomes especially subversive in the years following Jesus's death and resurrection, when the children lead the way with their palm branches, the tradition we recreate each year, ourselves. We follow the children into the sanctuary the same way we're meant to follow them into the future, knowing that the next generation will continue to lead the way to a better world.

To add to the very clear message that Jesus is sending to both his followers and the powers that be, he goes straight from the triumphal entry into the temple, to flip the tables of the money-changers and call out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and authorities of the time. The children cry out to him, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" The religious leaders grow angry and anxious, and begin to plot their revenge.

What we learn from Matthew's account of Palm Sunday is that while Jesus was an innocent man, he was not a passive participant in the events leading up to his death. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Palm Sunday is an invitation to consider to whom or what we shout “Hosanna!” Who do we worship, in whom do we put the trust that should belong only to God?

Listen now for God’s word to us through the gospel of Matthew, chapter 21, verses 1-17.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

“Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
Humble and mounted on a donkey,  
And on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “it is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’  
But you are making it a den of robbers.”

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did and heard the children crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to

the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for yourself?’”

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Earlier on in Anthony Doerr’s novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, long before Marie-Laure and Werner are eating peaches together after the bombing of St. Malo that Richard mentioned last week, we encounter Marie-Laure as a little girl, newly blind, passing her time at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, where her father works as a locksmith. One of her favorite things to do at the museum is wander down to the laboratory of Dr. Geffard, a mollusk expert whose beard, according to Marie-Laure, smells permanently of damp wool. Dr. Geffard enchants Marie-Laure with stories of his travels around the world, collecting samples for his mollusk collection; the same collection that Marie-Laure spends hours with, exploring the shells and specimens, running them over in her hands, feeling their dimples and rivets and creases. And about her experience there, quote: “To really touch something, she is learning - the bark of a sycamore tree in the gardens; a pinned stag beetle in the Department of Entomology; the exquisitely polished interior of a scallop shell in Dr. Geffard’s workshop - is to love it.”

To really touch something, she is learning, is to love it.

This is a part of the mystery and joy of the Incarnation: to really touch something is to love it. God touched Earth, touched us, in the incarnate form of Jesus the Christ, who lived a perfect, human life, who showed us how to live as people of the light, and then was tried and crucified and buried and then raised to new life, that all of us might too experience the wonder of the resurrection dawn out of God’s abundant love.

This is the journey we begin today, to the foot of the cross, to mourn sin and sorrow in the world, to decry the corruption that killed Jesus after he was unjustly condemned to death. We also celebrate that death could not

overcome him, and we sing hymns proclaiming the salvific act of crucifixion for the sake of the whole world.

In Catholic theologian and scholar Kathryn Tanner's book *Christ the Key*, she posits that it is perhaps the Incarnation itself, *not* the act of crucifixion and death of Jesus, that is the saving act of the world. In other words, she invites us to wonder about the consequences of the incarnation, of God touching Earth. How can God touch something and it not be redeemed? To really touch something, she is learning, is to love it.

And so the passion narrative becomes not a story about Christ's sacrificial atonement but instead becomes a story about the natural consequences of perfect love living among us, and the way that a life lived with God's kingdom values threatens the way of life of the powers and authorities of this world. What happens when those in power are threatened? They find a way to eliminate the threat. What happens when you try to kill God, perfect love, living among us? You can't. Love is strong as death, stronger than the grave, stronger than even hell itself. And so, like Lazarus rising at the sound of God's voice, Jesus emerges from the grave.

I prefer this interpretation, in part because it avoids some uncomfortable questions about why a just and loving and all-powerful and omnipotent God would require the blood sacrifice of his only son in order to save humanity, but also because I find that it fits more completely in my overall understand of the triune God as revealed in Scripture and especially through the person of Jesus Christ. We are saved because God lived among us, and we will know eternity because Christ was raised to new life.

But we're not there yet.

We still need to deal with the bare-branched aftermath of today's celebration. After the palms are piled along the highway, the coats picked up and dusted off, the crowds dispersed, Jesus heads straight to the temple and calls out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and authorities. This, ultimately, kicks off the final stages of the events that lead to his arrest. When his disciples will scatter, when Peter will deny him, when the court will find him guilty even though he has committed no crime. And beneath the trees stripped of their branches just days before, Jesus will carry his cross, abandoned and alone.

We search, as readily as those who lived that fateful Holy Week, for comfort and safety. We look out for our own. We are always looking for that thing that will save us. To whom can we shout “Hosanna!”? Our politicians? Celebrities? Will we be saved by a new diet or new job or new spouse? Things in this life seem so precious and tenuous. We want something that we can hold onto, feel in our hands. To really touch something is to love it.

I don't have to tell you that we're not there yet - not at the empty tomb - in our own world. We're not there yet, because not even a week ago, families gathered in a Presbyterian sanctuary not so unlike this one, and not so far away, to learn whether their loved ones would fill their seats at the dinner table that night.

And this is the bare-branched aftermath in this modern Palm Sunday setting: it's not coats that line the road, but news cameras. Instead of palm branches, the onlookers hold handmade signs. Politicians and religious leaders and other authorities point fingers and posture about who's to blame until the next crisis. And in the aftermath, when the cameras have re-assembled elsewhere, and the signs have been discarded in the trunk of somebody's car, there remains a mother, standing in the dead of night, weeping over her child's empty bed.

Jesus's death at the hands of the authorities in Jerusalem may have been inevitable, but the deaths of innocent children at the hands of gun violence are *not*.

I was in the fifth grade when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School nearly twenty-four years ago and committed what was, at that point, the deadliest school shooting in our nation's history. For weeks after, I would stay in my room in the morning, hysterical, begging my parents to let me stay home. Asking them to assure me - to look me in my eyes and promise - that if I went to school I would come home alive.

And now, when I drop my two-year-old off at his daycare, I am seized with the same fear.

When Columbine happened, school shootings were exceptionally rare. They remained rare, one every few years. As time passed, it became

maybe one a year, then a few, then more than a few. And we've arrived where we are now, facing a reality that in 2023 there has been one school shooting *every week this year*. Gun violence deaths have surpassed deaths by car accidents and childhood cancer as the leading cause of death for children in this country. This is not something that parents experience in the abstract. And this is not something that's happening in the abstract for people you don't know. If you aren't currently parenting a school-aged child, look around. The parents of the children who gathered up here last week sit next to you in your pews, they lead you in worship, and just 24-hours after we celebrated the sacrament of baptism and made promises to love and nurture and care for sweet children of this church, parents were having conversations with their partners, again, about how best to keep their children safe. We wonder if we should look at our finances and figure out a way to homeschool. We browse bulletproof backpacks online. We discuss if we should tell our kids to disobey their teachers and run as fast and as far as they can should they find themselves in a situation with an active shooter in their school. Those of us who lived through the first school shootings, the onset of active shooter drills and bomb threats and lockdowns are now raising children ourselves, and we lie in bed at night as our hearts jump into our throats and our stomachs twist into knots and we pray and we pray and we pray, all while knowing that if nothing changes in terms of policy and practice in our nation, it's not a matter of if it will happen to our community, our school, our children, but when.

We cannot cry out "Hosanna" to the one who comes in the name of the Lord and then continue to sacrifice our children on the altar of gun worship.

Christ came to earth and died to *free* us from this kind of violence. He showed us, in the triumphal entry and the overturning of the tables in the temple, how we're supposed to respond to those who seek to do harm with their power rather than good.

Jesus Christ did not come and live among us and walk the road to Calvary and hang upon the cross and cry out "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" so that we might continue to allow for a society in which nine-year-olds are shot to death in their classrooms. This might be a controversial thing for a pastor to say at the beginning of Holy Week,



but I'm not entirely sure that Jesus *would* forgive us for that, because we know exactly what it is that we are doing.

One thing that gets shared a lot in times of crisis like this is a quote from one of our favorite Presbyterian Pastors, Fred Rogers. I've seen it a few times this week, shared on facebook and instagram. Mr. Rogers says that in times of crisis we should look for the helpers. Look for the helpers. And generally, I really like that advice. But one thing that gets lost in the likes and retweets is that Mr. Rogers was talking to children. He was telling the children to look around for the helpers.

Friends, we are the helpers. No one is coming to save us from ourselves. Christ took on life and death already, he has shown us how we're meant to live, and he's waiting for us to follow him into the light of a new day.

So get up and go. Follow Christ to the cross and out of the tomb and into the life he calls all of us to live. Ask yourself what kind of world you want to live in. Ask yourself if you're on the side of life and light or death and destruction. Ask yourself what it would take to live in a safer, more just and equitable world and then go make it happen.

Do it, as a church. Don't wait until the centennial task force project, don't wait until next month, or after the summer, or even another day. Call your legislators. Call every person who represents you from local councils to the Halls of Congress. Tell them that not only are you a constituent, but that you're a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church and you serve a God who has defeated death, and so you refuse to be enslaved by it any longer. Tell them that every Sunday you gather in worship and pray the prayer that Jesus taught his followers to pray, that God's kingdom would come and God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven, and that preschoolers having to hide from active shooters looks a whole lot more like hell.

You remind them, like Jesus reminded the authorities with the Triumphal Entry and overturning tables in the temple that there is a point to governance, that the contract that exists between public servants and the people whom they serve is a free and fair and orderly society, in which people have their basic needs met and don't live constantly under the threat of violence. You tell them that you believe in a biblical and

theological mandate to care for the most vulnerable among us, and if they can't get in line with that you'll replace them with someone who will.

And may that agitating and advocating become like a sacrament to you. May you know that when you demand a better world for the sake of the next generation, you are fulfilling your baptismal promises. May you know that when you seek the welfare of the least of these, you proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord until he comes again; you declare that his body has been broken and his blood has been shed so that our children might remain whole.

We cannot do right by the innocent children whose lives have been lost to preventable gun violence in the last twenty years, but we can - and must - prevent it from happening again. This is the mandate of Palm Sunday. This is the call to action of Holy Week. This is the reason the sky goes dark and the earth shakes and the curtain is rent asunder as Jesus breathes his last breath. Anything less makes a mockery of the cross and liars of us all.

Some of you might find yourselves thinking, "Wow, Anna has really decided to go pretty hard for her last sermon here." And on the one hand, this is pretty close to the version of this sermon that I would give had I not accepted a new call. Palm Sunday invites preachers to really consider those things that Jesus would be highlighting as moral problems today, what hypocrisies he'd call out, what tables he'd overturn. I've said it to you all before: part of this holy calling to ministry of the Word and Sacrament is to be honest with ourselves and to tell you the truth, even if it's difficult to hear. On the other hand, I do feel a sense of urgency to really drive home this point: you, as a congregation, are so much more powerful and special than you know.

You are good and generous and kind and thoughtful people, capable of holding things in tension, of having difficult conversations, of welcoming those who are different and creating space for a multitude of ideas and experiences. You are well-educated, and influential, and resourceful, and well-connected. So if I could have only one parting prayer for you, it would be this: I pray that you will be so moved by the Holy Spirit that you will live more fully into the calling you're capable of living out in this world. You have all of the ingredients. Go, and make this community - this world - a better place for all of God's children. You're doing so much, already. Take the next steps to leverage all of that goodness and privilege that you

possess to effect real and lasting change. Don't be afraid of your own power; be liberated by it. It is the power of Almighty God, who is with you now and will not forsake you as you journey into the unknown.

You have touched me and my life in countless ways, and to really touch something, I'm learning, is to love it. I love you all deeply, and I viscerally feel the love we've shared, and I will carry it with me. Thank you.

As we pivot now from palm to passion and continue our journey to the foot of the cross, I hope you will really and deeply and truly think of all those who grieve an unnecessary loss this week. As Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" May you think of those who cry out the same, forsaken and forgotten not by God, but by this world. And may you be moved to action, again and again and again, until God's kingdom really has come, and God's will really is done, on earth as it is in heaven.

And may it be so for the life of the church. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.