

When Every Day is Good Friday

Matthew 21:1-11

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2** saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. **3** If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5 "Say to Daughter Zion

'See, your king comes to you,

gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"[a]

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. **7** They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. **8** A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna[b] to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"[c]

"Hosanna[d] in the highest heaven!"

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

I always feel conflicted about Palm Sunday. We go from celebrating the entry of Christ into Jerusalem to a week of thinking about Easter dinners, baked goods, and dyed eggs to Good Friday. I feel that "Good Friday" is always a bit of a misnomer. While Jesus' resurrection can certainly be labeled "good," there's really nothing "good" about "Good Friday" if one lives into the story. In fact, to label it "good" misses the point. There are sometimes I accidentally say "Black Friday" and then I get into a big conundrum as to why a day of shopping gets mixed into my theological vocabulary.

According to the church year, we're not there yet. Right now, we are at the point of children parading with palms, the shouting of "Hosanna," and we get to sing that one song, maybe two songs. we only get to sing on Palm Sunday. But I can't help but wonder if some folks didn't have a little foresight. Jesus was a known enemy of the state. He's boldly riding into Jerusalem, the heart of it all. I can't help but wonder if some people who were celebrating thought, "this might not end well."

What I like about this story is the rather unusual way it starts. Jesus tells his disciples to bring back a donkey and a colt and if anyone gives them any trouble, say "The Lord

needs them.” This is assuming the person just happens to know “the Lord” in question. Then, somehow, he rides in on both the colt and the donkey, which must have been incredibly uncomfortable as well as a sight to see.

The story behind Jesus’ triumphal entry has with it a common interpretation of events. Military heroes would ride in on their animals, showing off, announcing their military prowess. Jesus subverts this by riding in on a donkey with a blanket over it and his weird group of disciples.

In terms of setting the background of what’s going on, this is all happening during Passover. Matthew doesn’t say this explicitly, but that’s what’s going on. In Jewish tradition, there are 3 major “pilgrimage” festivals a year, and Passover is one of them. Since Passover is literally the celebration of the Israelites liberation from Egypt, this has political undertones. Passover was a time when there was extra security in the city of Jerusalem. Passover had the possibility of bringing sedition and unrest.

Jesus adds to this. Jesus comes in claiming to be King. Jesus comes in saying he’s the Son of David. Jesus’s actions were also made to gain more than just street level attention, as the streets were very narrow.

The crowds go wild! They shout “Hosanna!” which means “save!” And we, as a congregation, get caught up in this story. We encourage the children, we wave our palm branches, and we get caught up in this “collective effervescence” of excitement over Jesus as King. The question that commentator Greg Carey asks is, “Now that we have acclaimed Jesus along with the crowds and the children, will we continue in this way as conflict escalates?”

I guess what I want to focus on is this concept of an escalating situation. Back when I worked in mental health we always talked about “de-escalation.” How to get a situation that’s at a 10, meaning it is or is about to be out of control, down to a 3 or 4. Because we’re human, we can start to absorb the feelings of the scene around us. That can be a part of de-escalation. To get away from the scene that’s contributing things being at a 10. De-escalation means knowing your non-negotiables. It means being calm and clear. It means being willing to wait it out, however long it takes. Only when I worked in social work was my ability to wear people out an asset rather than a character flaw.

So going back to what it means to claim Jesus as King when tensions are high. Let’s not lose sight of the fact that this is a rebellious thing that we’re taking on, to pick up palm branches and shout “hosanna!” We’re pledging allegiance to this king but not yet king riding into town on a donkey AND a colt (let’s not forget he rode them both) through narrow streets during our super political Passover celebration.

You might say that we don’t know that kind of tension as Christians today. And we don’t. Constantine did his thing and now there are a whole lot of us celebrating our holy days like Easter, Christmas, Lent, Advent, Pentecost, Ascension Day...

But right now, we know a different kind of tension. We're at war with a virus that in a matter of a few months has changed all of our lives. Even if it hasn't changed your daily routine that much, you know someone who has had their life changed. We simply don't do anything the same anymore. And it's political. And tensions are high. And in the midst of all of it...our messiah is riding in on a colt and a donkey. Is this it? Is this what we've been waiting for?

I think what I've been trying to focus on as of late is how to de-escalate the tension in my own life as a result of what's going on around me to focus on the tension that deserves more of my head space, which is the tension of having Jesus as Lord in a world that gets ugly in the way it treats so many of God's children.

By no means am I suggesting that one of these matters and one of these doesn't, my goal is to name the unique dichotomy of tension we are living in. It's life and death right now, in a number of different ways.

De-escalating our own tension is hard, but there are ways to do it. We can remember to breathe. When we're stressed, or tense, or in a conflict, we can unwittingly restrict our air flow and cut ourselves off of essential oxygen. So take the time to breathe.

Distraction can sometimes be written off as something fluffy or unimportant but in days where our whole selves are glued to the news, distraction is essential. Distraction gets us out of this world for a bit and focuses our energy elsewhere. There is the "fluffy" distraction route, playing a game with someone in your home or via Zoom, watching a funny TV show or reading a lighthearted book. But there's also significant distraction, distraction from the noise that helps other people, such as helping your neighbor, checking in on loved ones, making time for a phone call. By remembering that this is not just stressful for us but for other people as well, we can de-escalate ourselves by focusing on our people.

In a de-escalating situation with another person, one step is to listen to another person's concerns. I would like to cut some of that out and say "listening" is a key way to de-escalate ourselves and others. Some of us can feel pretty detached from our feelings, or push things down until they cause us physical harm or mental harm. If expressing your feelings is difficult a way to get around that may be to listen to yourself. If you can listen to yourself saying that this is a really scary time right now. It can be easier to have compassion for yourself when you're not operating like you normally do. The same goes for other people. Where can we listen? Where can grace be extended? Listening and trying to understand what's going on can allow folks space to give voice to their fears and feel validated in the process.

But then there's this other tension. The tension we feel going into Holy Week. This tension I named earlier of knowing the full Easter story but still needing to live through Good Friday. Still needing to make that journey to the cross. The complete 180 of the crowds going absolutely wild this Palm Sunday, to the Holy Week denial, betrayal, and death of the Son of God. Can we lean into that tension?

I think leaning into that tension means to recognize that we are human. The disciples show us that even those closest to Jesus, those with him every day participating in his mission were either downright traitorous or simply ignorant when it came to being there for Jesus during the drama of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. This doesn't give us a free pass to forget who we are and who God has called us to be, but in times of stress, when push comes to shove, we can end up being like the disciples. We "forget" we know Jesus or we fall asleep. I think Jesus' declaration of asking God to forgive "them" was not just for the Romans carrying out Jesus' execution, but also for those who did something, did nothing, or forgot who they were.

Leaning into the tension also means sitting with Good Friday. The tension that some felt going into Palm Sunday with all the shouting and celebration certainly gave some pause as to this possibly ending badly. And indeed, the worst-case scenario does indeed play out. Our collective inclination is to not feel the sadness too deeply because in a few days' time we will see the resurrected Lord and celebrate one of the happiest of holy days: Easter.

No one wants to stay in Good Friday, nor should we, but what if we leaned into those uncomfortable feelings? Those feelings that say we have something to be sad about? While we know that death ultimately does not have the last say, what if we just let ourselves feel the weight of what's going on? The weight of death, which is very real right now, the weight of not knowing what to do now, the weight of watching and waiting. Not staying there, not allowing ourselves to ultimately despair, but having a little grace for ourselves in the sense that this is not where we saw things going. Or even if we did, here we are.

Living into Good Friday also means being bold in a time of unrest. While it can seem as if all hope is lost, we have Jesus who knows something is going on. Jesus knows what it means to ride into Jerusalem during a really tense time. Jesus is bold. Jesus takes risks. Right after this, Jesus cleanses the temple. Jesus did not come to play and knows exactly what the consequences are of such a bold action. Jesus is an enemy of the state, and by the time this is all over, will die as an enemy of the state. When we take a chance on what we know to be right, when we step out boldly in faith, we are following in the way of Jesus on this Palm Sunday. Now I'm not promoting any bold "ignoring social distancing" or "putting your health at risk" kind of stepping out in faith, but what bold things can you do, where you are, to put your faith into action during the time we are living in? This needn't be some grand gesture where you're a literal lifeline to people, or doing lots of big, noteworthy things. Not all grand gestures of boldness and faith end up in the paper, or on social media. Small gestures can be just as bold as riding into Jerusalem during a tense time.

I admit this is strange. This is a celebration of a triumphal entry while at the same time preparing us for the passion story that is before us. I feel that we are invited into a two-fold call during this time. One is a call to de-escalate ourselves. During a stressful and uncertain time, taking a step back and breathing. Taking a step back and realizing that

we don't know a whole lot at this time. Taking a step back and focusing on something other than the hopelessness that can consume us.

At the same time, the other part of our call is to not get so wrapped up in things that we're not attentive to our Holy Week story. We are trying to live into what it means to acknowledge that we are human and we won't be able to get things right all the time. Sitting with our sadness, both the sadness of our passion story and the sadness of the times we are living in. Our call is also to step out in faith, in whatever way that looks like for our current time and place.

These calls are not easy. And trying to fit them all into this special week coming up probably won't work, and that's ok. But as we continue to worship online, as we continue to connect with one another with social distance but not emotional distance, and as we figure out how to be family together even though we are physically apart, it's my hope that we can encourage one another and inspire one another to both find a "new normal" in this reality and also live into a story that's greater than ours. To live into a story that has sadness, and boldness, and joy, and fear, and love. Maybe there is no more relevant story for our time right now as this story of passion and resurrection. May our God who knows great pain but also knows great joy be with us now and into this holiest of weeks. Amen.