

Palm Sunday A 02 April 2023
Matthew 21:1-11
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God, now and forever. Amen.

When [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'

There're two things I want to focus on this Palm Sunday – “turmoil” and the question, ‘Who is this?’

Turmoil

Today is Palm Sunday, also known as the Sunday of the Passion. Incidentally, the English word, “Passion” from the Latin verb to “suffer, bear, endure” [*patior, passus sum*]; referred to Jesus’ suffering long before it evolved into today’s “barely controllable emotion.”

(There are two gospel readings: Matthew 21:1-11 ([the Triumphal Entry] and Matthew 27:11-54 [the Passion]). With everything that happens in this event, I’m wondering whether we should rename the day. What if we renamed today, “Turmoil Sunday?” Does that sound like the gospel to you? Are you hoping that Jesus brings you some turmoil today? Are you ready to follow the “turmoil bringing” Jesus?

Honestly, my answers are, “No, no,” and “no.” I’ve never prayed for Jesus to bring me some turmoil. If you’re anything like me [you need help!], you pray and hope for the opposite: peace and calm, answers to questions, and solutions to problems. I don’t believe anyone came here today looking for turmoil. We came to hear the story of Jesus riding a donkey, sing our hosannas, and enjoy waving palms around.

The crowds that followed Jesus probably weren’t any different. A ride on a borrowed donkey, songs of celebration and praise, garments and branches paving Jesus’ path to victory; now that’s a triumphal entry. And most of us would be pretty happy to leave it at that.

So why would we rename this day, “Turmoil Sunday?” Despite what we see, our expectations and hopes for the day, and what we want to believe, Jerusalem itself, responds very differently to Jesus’ triumphal entry. “When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this’” [:10]? Turmoil seems to shadow Jesus wherever he goes.

I wonder if Jerusalem understands something we don’t. I wonder whether we’re so easily distracted by the donkey, hosannas, and palms that we miss what’s really going on. Maybe the city’s response is the most faithful response. Maybe we should all be in turmoil today. Maybe the good news for today is turmoil. Maybe the turmoil Jesus brings is exactly what we need.

St Matthew makes it abundantly clear that turmoil sets the tone not just for today but throughout this entire week. But this turmoil isn’t our usual understanding of the word turmoil. It’s more than our usual idea of chaos, confusion, and uncertainty.

The Greek word translated as turmoil [ἐσεισθη], means to stir things up or shake like an earthquake. St Matthew uses the same idea to describe Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, as the shaking of the earth and the splitting of the rocks at Jesus’ crucifixion (Matthew 27:51), the earthquake that accompanies the angel coming and rolling the stone away from Jesus’ tomb (Matthew 28:2), and the shaking of the guard who stood at the tomb (Matthew 28:4).

In all these events, St Matthew is describing seismic occurrences in which our lives and our world are shaken to the core and something is destroyed. That’s what earthquakes do. The destruction wrought by Holy Week, however, isn’t the end but a new beginning. The tremblers of this week will forever change who we are and the life we live.

On Monday, everyone in the house will be shaken as the sweet fragrance of love will mingle with the coming death of Jesus. On Tuesday, the invitation to die before we die will become the epicentre of our faith. On Wednesday, Judas’ betrayal will reveal the fault line in all of us. On Thursday, we’ll tremble at the intimacy of touching and washing another person’s feet and having them touch and wash ours. On Friday, the earth will quake as the cross of our Creator is driven into the heart of death. The silence of Saturday will cause the gates of hell to shudder and burst open, as Jesus descends to strike the serpent’s head.

Holy Week will be one seismic calamity after another. You know what happens in an earthquake. The foundations on which we stand are shaken. Old things crumble and fall. The structures around which we've built our lives are left in ruin and rubble. That's how Jerusalem experiences Jesus' entry and that's why this day could be called, "Turmoil Sunday."

Who is this?

So, who is this one who has crowds hailing his arrival; whom crowds herald with adulation,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

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

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Who is this man who causes the whole city of Jerusalem to be in upheaval when he enters it? Who is this one whose very presence causes cataclysmic disruption?

- This is the one God sent because "God so loved the world" (John 3:16).
- This is the one who promises, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20).
- This is the one who says, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).
- This is the one who says, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you' (John 14:27).
- This is the one who says, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid' (John 14:27).
- This is the one who says, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11).
- This is the one who 'calls his own sheep by name and leads them out' (John 10:3).
- This is the one who says, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12).
- This is the one who says, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25).
- This is the one who comes that we 'may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).
- This is the one who embodies God's promise, 'I will never leave you or forsake you' (Hebrews 13:5).
- This is the one who is 'making all things new' (Revelation 21:5).

- This is the one who says, ‘Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20).

I hope you hear the echoes of Easter in the list of who this Jesus is, because Holy Week is always difficult and painful; it always causes turmoil in our hearts.

So let me put this challenge before you. What parts of your life and world need some Jesus kind of turmoil? What, in you, needs to be shaken awake and back to life? What’s become foundational for your life but no longer supports your life? What are the old ways of thinking, seeing, and acting that just need to crumble and fall? In what ways have you become a prisoner of the very structures upon which you built your life? Somewhere in each of our lives we need the triumphant turmoil of Christ. It’s the devastation of everything in us that keeps us from being fully alive, fully ourselves, and fully God’s. It’s the cosmic disruption of Jesus entering our lives that creates space and place for a new foundation, a new structure, and a new life.

The turmoil of this day is also the triumph of this day. The triumph of Palm Sunday isn’t in the donkey, the hosannas, or the palms. It’s Christ’s earth-shaking entry into our world and our lives. It’s a triumph that will continue to be revealed throughout this week. It’s a triumph that happens whenever and wherever Jesus is present.

Whatever Holy Week is for you – whatever it brings you, takes from you, or asks of you – it already resounds with the echoes of Easter. That’s always the tension in Holy Week. It’s the tension in our lives. And it was the tension in Jesus’ life.

So, keep awake and be ready. Don’t take your eyes off the prize for one second. Don’t turn away from your Holy Week, because this one who enters the turmoil of Jerusalem, this “one who comes in the name of the Lord” – this Jesus, is the one who will rise to new life on the third day.

And, Saints, he plans on taking you with him. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.