

Bearing Witness to the Pain—Preaching in the Age of COVID-19
 Palm Sunday 2020
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 April 5, 2020

*“Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?
 and why are you so disquieted within me?”
 I ask all this in the name of God who creates us all; Amen.*

Morning.

Do you find yourself filled with a sense of fear and foreboding?

When you rise each day, as you wander and walk morning by morning, do sighs and tears suddenly find their way into your throat and on your face without ever even being conscious of the thoughts that fueled their release? Or --- have you found yourself surprised by the presence of the sun, mystified by the arrival of Spring, taken aback when people laugh?

In this pandemic time, in this age of COVID, I seem to have a focus, on only the virus. I walk about my home with it wrapped around me like a cloak of despair. I suspect I am not alone.

And so what am I, what are we, to do with the remembrance of Jesus riding on a colt into Jerusalem? This beginning of Holy Week, the Passion of our Lord, what are we to do with this?

What are we to make of the crowds of long ago who gather, (so very close together,) to shout and sing: “Hossana, Hossanna, Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord.” Joyfully anticipating that he, Jesus, having arrived in the city of despair, will now change everything. Now. Now. Now. Change our world. Change how we live. Change who dies. Change our world now.

What are we to do with this image some 20 centuries later?

What are we to do when we have no palms to hold, no fronds to wave?

Perhaps, in this Pandemic Age, perhaps this year we are not to imagine ourselves as the crowds, passively waiting to receive change, perhaps our roles are not so simple.

This year perhaps, we are to be more with Jesus, more like his disciples, following behind. Perhaps we are called to be with Jesus; Jesus who does hide himself or go away. Jesus who instead, turns toward the city on a hill, He who turns toward the holy city of God; He who turns toward Jerusalem, with full knowledge that pain and death likely await.

In this time of COVID despair, in this holiest of all Holy Weeks perhaps we are called, perhaps we are challenged to be with Jesus, to be with him in the Garden of Gethsemane and not to sleep, but to be in relentless prayer. Perhaps we are called to not run away as the guards arrive to arrest him and carry him away, perhaps we are called when asked to never ever deny, what we know is happening. Perhaps we are called to be completely and utterly with Jesus.

Perhaps this is our must: together to share, come what may, to be present, a silent vigil, not distracted, not turning away, but eyes wide, hearts open, ready to absorb and hold, the heroic sacrifice of those of us who have medical expertise, who are daily risking their lives, to care for us who become sick, perhaps we must hold and honor that love and service we who have not these skills by simply staying home.

Perhaps we are called to hold and bear witness to the deep disparity of those of us who must go to work to meet others' needs, those whose jobs cannot be done on a screen, but must be attended to in person with all of the mortal risks that are involved.

Let us never forget, Jason Hargrove, a Detroit bus driver, who made a video, pointing out the risks of his job, driving a bus, transporting people to and fro, in the midst of the virus. Two weeks later he left this earth, killed by the virus. How could he have been so exposed, so unprotected? How can this be?

Or Lisa Ewald, ER nurse, one of Michigan's first health care workers to die of this disease. Or Amy Kohair, parishioner and long-time leader of St. James', Grosse Ile, who died of this disease.

Perhaps this Holy week we are called we who may not leave our homes to work, perhaps we are called to not lose ourselves, absent our souls to memes and gifs and endless trips down our Facebook feeds.

Instead, I pray that you and I, that we may stay attuned, as vigilant a soul, as a watchman waits for the morning, as attuned as a marine on patrol, that we will never stop bearing witness to the pain and peril unfolding all around us.

This is what I pray, that I, that you, that we may have the courage and tenacity to not turn away. I pray that we bear witness and see it all, so when joy does come in the morning, we who may live and survive will do all we can to alter and change that in our country and world which exacerbates power of this virus' death and despair.

All of that is what comes next. But now, in this viral, virtual Holy Week we are called to follow Jesus and to witness, to not turn away, so that we may someday tell the story of this time.

“Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?

and why are you so disquieted within me?"

Go we must, to Jerusalem, to bear witness to the pain.
Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord.

In Christ's Holy Name I pray.

Amen.