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Palms, Hands, and Hearts
Matthew 21:1-11

I grew up in Louisiana, which means I was basically weaned on sweet tea made with mint from the back yard and have been to my fair share of crawfish boils. Louisiana probably also conjures up images of bayous hanging with Spanish moss, LSU football, and maybe above all else, Mardi Gras. It's not wrong to picture those things, but my hometown is Shreveport, in the upper Northwest corner of the state – not Cajun country. It's oil and gas country, with riverboat casinos now. People do celebrate Mardi Gras there, but the parades are mostly daytime, family friendly affairs, with local people in lawn chairs, kids on their dad's shoulders eating moon pies and catching beads. People from little towns in East Texas and Southern Arkansas come for the fun, but it's not a destination like New Orleans or Mobile.

There is a growing outbreak of Covid-19 in my hometown right now. A lot of people are sick and getting sicker. Epidemiologists are guessing that it's in part due to the timing of Mardi Gras – both those who travelled to New Orleans and came back, and those at the Shreveport parades, some of whom were asymptomatic carriers of the virus, sick but not yet showing symptoms.¹ And it means some of the folks who drove over from Longview or down from Texarkana might have brought home more than beads. The lack of testing in those smaller towns is troublesome, because there is likely community transmission happening in those places – just like in south Louisiana and in Mobile, where thirty first responders, police and firefighters, tested positive last week.²

¹ Sepkowitz, Kent, "The alarming message of Louisiana's sharp rise in Covid-19 cases," CNN Opinion, 3/29/20, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/29/opinions/shreveport-louisiana-new-orleans-coronavirus-kent-sepkowitz-opinion/index.html>

² "Update: Mobile police officer tests positive for Covid-19, 33 first responders test positive for Covid-19 antibodies," wkrg staff, posted 4/1/20, updated 4/3/20, <https://www.wkrg.com/health/coronavirus/16-mobile-first-responders-test-positive-for-covid-19-antibodies/>

It is hard for me to wrap my head and heart around the truth that a joyful and fun community celebration was not only dangerous, and even deadly – and will continue to have terrible repercussions for Shreveport and the surrounding area. Talk about cognitive dissonance. It is hard to imagine a time in the near future when we will be able to gather together again – not crowded in close proximity for a concert, a festival or a football game, a worship service, or a palm parade... at least, it will be hard to feel relaxed and joyful about it. Picture shaking hands with someone you just met, or hugging a friend without hesitation or at least a twinge of anxiety.

Some things may change completely. Large crowds, even celebratory ones – just won't be safe for us for a long time to come.

The parade we commemorate on this Palm Sunday – Jesus' triumphant procession into Jerusalem – wasn't safe, either. Not for the peasants who lined the roads, cheering for the man they hoped would save them. Not for the disciples, many of whom would later become martyrs for their cause, and certainly not safe for Jesus, who would be betrayed, put through a sham of a trial, and executed in less than a week.

See, the procession into Jerusalem, with Jesus on a donkey and people and cheering him on - was a visible, direct provocation of the power of Rome and the religious authorities.

It was visible – the steep, winding road coming down from the Mount of Olives into the city, and the road going up to the temple was a route sure to be seen – especially by the Roman army, which had been deployed to the city to keep the peace during Passover. Passover, you'll remember, celebrates God's liberation of the people of Israel from the bonds of slavery in Egypt. It's the perfect time to stage a messianic uprising if you're into that kind of thing. And with upwards of 200,000 people gathered in a town that may have been 40,000 otherwise, tensions must have been high.

Jesus entered the city like a general returning from war, with people waving branches and throwing their coats on the road in front of him. Matthew takes great care to connect this procession with the messianic predictions of the prophet Zechariah, which may explain why he has Jesus ride on both a donkey and her colt – a strange feat if he even attempted it at all. People poured into the streets and waved palms because they believed he was the

messiah that had been promised. The one who would overthrow Rome once and for all and save them from oppression.

And the parade didn't stop at the city gates. Jesus didn't just arrive in Jerusalem in style. He went straight to the temple. And when he got there, he went in, tossed tables, and threw out the money lenders – proclaiming it to be a house of prayer for all people, not just the rich, but everyone... purporting to speak for God.

And through all of this, the people cried: Hosanna! An old Hebrew or Aramaic word that means, Save us, or help us, we pray! Or, a joyous cry of “savior!”

I love Palm Sunday. I love the departure from church as usual – the procession with palms and our Catholic neighbors, the wail of bagpipes and the smell of incense, the sense of celebration at the start of the holiest of weeks. Shouts of “hosanna!” ringing out around the block and reverberating in our sanctuary.

This year, those hosannas take on a whole new significance for me. Because now more than ever, I feel like we could use some divine intervention! What started as a problem far away has gotten very real, very fast. Our lives have shifted dramatically, people we know and love are sick, friends and family are suddenly serving on the front lines, people are quarantined in their homes, small businesses are shuttered, many people dying, 10 million now unemployed and suddenly without health insurance in the midst of a massive public health crisis.

It is overwhelming, and scary. Hosanna, hosanna – someone, anyone, please – rescue us!

The crowds turned on Jesus pretty quickly when they realized he was not the kind of messiah they were hoping for. He didn't come to overthrow Rome or toss out the religious leaders. His work was so much bigger than that. He came to redeem all of creation. He saves us not through military might or by miraculously stopping a deadly virus – but by simply being with us, entering into our suffering, enduring the worst the world can offer right alongside us. In the week ahead, we will remember how he confronts and unmasks the powers of sin and death, and shows us how to confront them courageously, with love.

I believe we are uniquely situated to enter into the drama of holy week this year. Because the contradictions of Palm Sunday are echoed in the contradictions of daily life in this pandemic: Terry said in her welcome, Palm Sunday is a day of mixed messages – the crowds joyfully celebrating the arrival of their king, under the gathering stormclouds of imperial suspicion and the religious leaders plotting to neutralize the threat of his peasant uprising. Jesus is hailed as king, but he comes humbly, and riding on a donkey. God confronts the violence of the empire through the peaceful, self-giving love of Christ.

This is such a difficult time – a time of contradictions. We must be apart from each other right when it feels like we need each other the most. But staying home, and keeping our distance from one another is the best thing we can do to show our love for one another, to protect our elders and the most vulnerable people in our community, to support our doctors and nurses and EMTs. The grief and disappointment, worry and loneliness or demands of each day can be overwhelming – all while outside, life springs forth in such fragrant beauty, blooming with absolute abandon. Each man for himself mentality comes up against story after story of loving hands sewing thousands upon thousands of fabric masks for first responders, almost 20,000 in Birmingham alone, and innovators using 3-D printers to create needed protective equipment, and brewers brewing hand sanitizer instead of beer.³ In the midst of this mess, there is so much love, and so much hope for the future. We will get through this.

Just as we are called to walk with Jesus through the difficult days ahead, we must not look away from the suffering of those who are in the midst of this crisis. As people of faith, we must look and see the divides the virus uncovers – between those who can afford preventative care and those who cannot. Between those who can afford to stay home and those who must risk going to work. Between those who care enough to wear a mask to protect others and those who refuse. Between those who have a safe place to stay and those who do not. What might happen if we use our voices, our hearts, our resources to bridge the gaps –calling for paid sick leave, Medicaid expansion, and safe, affordable housing. What if each one of us picked up the phone this week and called our Governor, or our elected

³ Various articles on al.com have profiled the awesome people doing this good work, and I'm indebted to their reporting.

representatives and took action on just one of those things? As an act of hope for our collective future?

This week, I invite you to join us as we follow Jesus. We will see his love made real around a table with friends in the meal we will share on Thursday. We will see his love even unto death, which we will remember on Friday. The testimony of this holy week is that Jesus does whatever it takes to heal, to save, and to free us from the powers of sin and death. Thanks be to God.