

Palm Sunday – March 25, 2018

Mark 11:1-11; Zechariah 9:9-10; Philippians 2:5-11

Grace to you and peace...

The Parkland, Florida students have already died. Their friends are dead. They've already endured the very thing they are protesting. This protest, then, which they organized in Washington DC yesterday, and the protests around the country that sprung from their efforts, is not about "saving" themselves or about protecting their rights. Look closely. For them this protest is about saving others. "Never Again" they proclaim. We've already died – we march now for the lives of others – kids in other schools, students we've never met – but whose lives are precious, and whose lives matter.

They've already died to the innocence that their school is a safe place for them. And so, they are free to give their lives away for the sake of others.

The way my history books taught it, Rosa Parks was just a lone woman, simply too tired to give up her seat on the bus one more time as required by the Jim Crow laws that governed her life. Poor Rosa, just too tired, and maybe fed up with a system that required her to forfeit her seat and her dignity to white people, simply couldn't move to the back of the bus again.

And somehow – as it seemed to me as a child – that singular act of exhaustion was enough to breakdown the whole system of oppression that gripped every aspect of Black lives.

There was little mention of the months and years of Black women organizing that led to that moment. Or the subsequent months of boycotting the bus system that followed. The miles walked. The rides arranged. The sacrifices made – because they had already died to the notion that the white power structure would ever value them as human beings worthy of dignity and respect.

I was naïve before Grant Stevensen invited me to risk being arrested during a protest about Philando Castille’s unjust death. I had no idea the extent of the preparations that go into orchestrating a public protest. The National Teachers’ Union was meeting in Minneapolis and was willing to march in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Those designated for arrest were planful and organized. We were prepared in advance for what to expect, including a plan for what would happen post-arrest. Up to that point I had been naïve.

But Jesus wasn’t.

Jesus knew full well the consequences he faced when he chose to oppose the powers of oppression and inhumanity that crushed the lives of the people. Contrary to what I had always imagined, Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem was not likely just a spontaneous outpouring of support from an unsuspecting crowd.

This public action was, at the very least, an informed enactment of the prophecy from Zechariah we heard as our first reading. More than 500 years before the birth of Christ, the prophet declared the coming of a humble king who would come into Jerusalem on the back of a colt, to “cut off the chariot from

Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem;” who would cut off the battle bow and “command peace to the nations...from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.” After generations of violence and bloodshed the prophet proclaims and Jesus’ procession insists that Hebrew Lives Matter.

Certainly what we have come to know as a “procession of palms” was an assertion that God’s power would break the military might of this world. It was also a parody of the processional display of the military power of Rome. As Jesus entered Jerusalem by one gate riding on a donkey, to the acclaim of the disenfranchised, some argue that the Emperor was entering the same city by another gate, riding on a war horse, accompanied by a powerful military parade and celebrated by those benefiting from his power.

It was a political statement, without a doubt. But it was also more than that. Jesus’ procession on a colt, on a road strewn with cloaks and grasses, accompanied by shouts of acclamation and cries for salvation – was a stand against the principalities and powers that seek to deceive and possess all creation – in opposition to God.

Jesus’ actions stand squarely against the powers of death and destruction that diminish the abundant life God intends – embodied at that moment by the Roman Occupation. Jesus knew full-well the consequences he would face because of this public action. He had already spoken of his death that was to come. Fully aware of his own death, he gave his life away for the sake of those whom God loves.

In Christ, my friends, you too have already died. Like the survivors of far too many mass shootings, you too have died to the innocence that the structures of this world are benign. In Christ your eyes are open to the truth that the ways of this world will only crush you with impossible demands, suck every bit of life and loyalty out of you, divide you from everyone and everything in competition and isolation – and discard you like trash when you no longer feed the Economy.

Not so very different from the crowds that hailed Jesus, we too are longing for – can we say hungering? – for salvation from the systems and powers that bind us. But, also like the crowds, we are not so fond of a savior that bids us to come and die with him.

As Pastor David Lose writes, “I would prefer to be fixed than transformed. Christianity as on-going program of self-improvement is rather attractive, but Christianity as giving up the ghost of my vain expectations, of looking outward toward the need of others rather than inward to my own hopes, that’s a little harder to get excited about. Self-improvement validates the importance of self; a commitment to service based on Christ’s example (Phil. 2) doesn’t by any means denigrate the importance of the self but demonstrates how our existence, meaning, well-being and future is inextricably bound up in the existence, meaning, well-being and future of those around us.”

The students who organized and led the protests on Saturday have, out of their own painful experience, understood the interconnection of their lives with the lives of those who can yet be saved.

Mark's account ends on an anticlimactic note. Other gospel accounts move dramatically into the next powerful move – Jesus overturning the tables and driving out the money changers from the Temple. But in this gospel, after the street theater of a humble king riding on a colt, Jesus goes to the Temple in the evening. Seemingly quiet, Jesus simply looks around – as if assessing the scene, imagining his next move. Then he returns to Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, and spends the evening with his friends. There is more to come.

For us too. Friends, I cannot urge you enough. Make time this week to engage fully in the story as it unfolds.

It is with serious intention that we are not reading the passion story this morning. In order for the significance of this story – the heart and soul of the gospel message – to have its full weight, we have to dwell in it deeply. Completely. A superficial brush over it will leave you hungry and unsatisfied.

Wait these next days in the tension following today's act of protest and rebellion. Come Thursday and hear Jesus' deep call to love one another in real and messy and concrete, vulnerable, and awkward ways – just as Christ loves us. Receive the holy meal that is the sign of Christ's constant presence in and with us.

Return on Friday to witness the life giving act of faith as Jesus entrusts his own life completely to God, that we too might come to trust our whole selves – body, mind, spirit, possessions, failures, and accomplishments to the One who give us life now and forever.

Come on Saturday to dwell in the rich history of our faith story. Experience God's salvation history in the stories we share with our Jewish and Muslim cousins. Be present from the lighting of the new fire, through the mystery of dying and rising with Christ in the waters of baptism, and ring in the Light as the bonds of death are broken by the power of the resurrection. Celebrate the Feast that breaks our Lenten fast and revels in our redemption by God's gracious love and mercy.

And come again on Sunday to reclaim our joyous proclamation in the bright light of a new day. Come that morning after a week of faithful discipline – for the sake of those who will come just for that morning alone. The depth of your experience will give witness to the substance of faith for those not yet grounded in the weight of the whole story.

Because you have already died – and are free to give yourself away for the sake of others. Let it be so.

Amen.