

Palm Sunday in the Time of COVID-19
Matthew 21:1-11 and following
Rev. Shannon White
Wilton Presbyterian Church
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As I began to prepare for the sermon this week... pulling myself away from the TV which was giving yet another update of the horror this disastrous virus is causing, a question came to me:

What if Jesus were entering Jerusalem in the middle of a COVID-19 outbreak such as we are experiencing now?

Our whole theology would have to be reworked. What do I mean? Well, for starters, “the very large crowd who spread their cloaks and palm branches on the ground” wouldn’t have been allowed to gather. Social distancing and stay-at-home orders would have prevented them from doing so. The crowds cheers of “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord ~~ Hosanna in the highest” ~~ well, those crowds might have been shouting from their high rise apartments, much like the residents of Italy and New York City, serenading the healthcare heroes of our time as they finish their hospital shifts... but they would not have been up close and personal. If Jesus had entered into Jerusalem during the coronavirus, he might have sensed a city in turmoil by seeing empty streets and ice trucks being used as morgues ~~ that would be a city in turmoil, but the people would have been distracted, I would imagine, not caring who he was, unless he was bringing much needed medical equipment such as N95 masks or hauling ventilators to area hospitals... then they would have cared who he was... or if were ignoring the social distancing guidelines, you better believe law enforcement would have been on him and the people who may have been afraid that he might be

a carrier of the virus would be scolding or shaming him for having created such a stir.

Going further than our text took us this morning into the events of later this week, Jesus wouldn't have gone into the temple to turn over the tables in anger because the building would have been closed. Those vendors from the non-essential businesses wouldn't have been in there anyway doing business unless they were the last remnants of those who had not been furloughed or laid off. People just trying to get a buck to pay their rent and feed their families.

Maybe ~~ all through this time, Jesus would have contracted COVID-19 due to all the people with whom he had contact. He certainly would not have been wearing a mask. What if he had been required to be quarantined for 14 days or even hospitalized? That would have thrown off the whole timeline of this week.

The religious leaders of the day would not have been out to question his authority, because they hopefully would have been obeying the state guidelines as set by the Emperor. They may not have had the bandwidth to question someone they considered a heretic... no, those days would be gone, because everyone would have been just trying to tend to their own congregations and stay safe.

Jesus would not have had anyone to share his last wisdom... words which would have been handed down to the faithful even to this day letting people know who he was and why he had come.

The woman with the alabaster jar, who anointed Jesus' feet? That beloved intimate encounter of the woman wiping Jesus' feet with her hair wouldn't have happened because it was a gathering at someone's house and it would have put Jesus at risk... or the woman.

And the Last Supper? ...no dinner parties due to stay-at-home warnings for the next 30 or so days. No, if Jesus had come during the coronavirus, that supper, that last intimate connection with Jesus' beloved followers which we'll remember on Thursday night... and which provided the basis for one of our two sacraments we practice today – it wouldn't have been.

Jesus could have gone to the garden... alone. And he would have felt just as isolated as he did that night when the disciples couldn't stay awake. Judas still could have betrayed Jesus, but it wouldn't have had the same shame factor with none of the disciples around. The soldiers still would have come to arrest him. They couldn't have held a trial, because the courts would not have been in session. So, the decision to crucify Jesus would have been on the back of one man, the governor, Pilate... for the crowds would not have gathered to seal his fate by granting freedom to fellow prisoner, Barabbas.

And no one would have jeered as he walked through the streets dragging his cross, donned with a thorny crown; The guards may have been in protective gear and N95 masks. They would have witnessed it, but their identities would have been shielded. No one would have been there to witness the horror as they nailed him to the cross, all while wearing protective gloves. And who knows if they would have been able to hear Jesus cry out "My God, my God why have you forsaken me"... given that they would have had to stay at home.

So would the story have been the same in the middle of the coronavirus?

The thing is... Jesus is here in the middle of this coronavirus outbreak... he walks the streets, not with crowds cheering for his triumphal entry into whatever town USA or in other areas of the world... but he enters the worlds in which we are living right now and he witnesses all that is happening with and to us.

In fact, the rhythm of our lives in recent weeks to today is actually mirroring the movement of that week so long ago... from triumphal entry and cheering crowds to devastation and death.

Think about it.

We all were going along living our lives. Doing whatever we wanted to do. Some would say, humanity had gotten to the point of being a bit out of control. The level of national and personal debt has grown to an astronomical level; we have experienced a breakdown in our connection to one another as hate crimes against many groups has been on the rise in the last few years; the gap between the haves and the have-nots has grown substantially; our long-term mistreatment of the earth has resulted in major shifts in climate; levels of anxiety and depression among old and young have increased... in short... humanity is pretty much a mess.

Then comes the coronavirus.... and slowly but surely we've been stopped dead in our tracks. It's taken us a while to stop, but a majority of the world has been issued stay-at-home orders, or risk getting themselves or those they love sick... even to the point of death. Our lives as we knew them have been changed in a matter of days. People have gotten sick and died; people have lost jobs; people have lost money/their sense of security due to the markets; people are isolated and fearful. Life has stopped, except for those fighting on the front lines of the healthcare system.

That's the rhythm of how life changed that week so long ago for the followers of Jesus... full-on activity to a dead stop... forced to face their utter humanity and death of Jesus.

Many experts are calling this time in which we are living a time of Collective trauma—our lives have come to a complete halt. Nothing is

the same... We are exhausted, afraid, unclear, not knowing how to be... Some of us respond to that by trying to exert power and control, leading us to silly actions which threaten others. Others of us retreat and isolate, causing harm to ourselves. And as we come out of this, everything will be different. That's very scary for some.

God did not cause this virus, but our faith tells us that God will bring something redemptive out of this. Jesus enters into our lives reminding us that when everything in our lives is turned upside down, which is what happens here on earth, that's not the end of the story. Something different will emerge ~~ life will be different and new. This is the time to stop and listen to what that will be for you, for your family, for your other relationships, for our congregation, for our connection with humanity and with the earth.

So, stop and listen and be guided this week. Dig into the story in the gospel of Matthew... The journey is not over. We are told by our national leaders; our situation will get harder. Just as the events of holy week will lead us into more solemn times. The good news? As people of faith, we know the end of the story. We are being guided by One who is trustworthy. We are not alone... but we need to settle in and be aware and awake. We will be changed.

God is there with you and me right now in every circumstance and wants to do something new in each of us, in this unique time of our spiritual journeys.

May it be so! Alleluia, Amen ~~