

Palm Sunday 2021
Matthew 21:1-11
Matthew 9:1-8
Rev. Shannon White
Wilton Presbyterian Church

Over the years, I've heard a saying that's something to the effect of: people raise their voices and even yell when they don't believe they're being heard. I think that's right.

There have been a lot of people and crowds trying to make their voices heard this year... On the one hand, you've got people in the Black Lives Matter movement who are voicing their anger and frustration against what feels like a lifetime of incidents of police brutality and racially motivated violence against black and brown people. The movement gained full steam after the death of George Floyd last year on May 25 in Minneapolis by police. But the Black Lives Matter movement was actually formed seven years before that in 2013 after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Florida in 2012.

We've seen counterprotests as well... people desperate to have their voices heard too saying ALL lives matter... to counter the voices of black and brown people who are trying to gain justice. Oftentimes, the voices of counter protest have tried to squelch those trying to get justice. The riots at the Capitol on January 6 may have been another iteration of this group.

And then there are the voices of Asian Americans who are finally saying ENOUGH to the acts of violence perpetrated against them... which have been ignored for far too long in this country. This recent push prompted first by the racist attributions of the Coronavirus to people from China and then of course by the horrendous shootings in Atlanta by a young

white man, killing 8 people – six of whom were Asian American women – and wounding several others. The man allegedly originally claimed a distorted view of Christian faith when trying to squelch his sexual urges as a reason... as his motive... but that reasoning is a view which reigns supreme in a culture steeped in white supremacy. He allegedly claimed he was having a bad day... and so he took the lives of those he deemed as standing in his way... those he may have deemed as subhuman and not deserving of life because he felt they tempted him.

This is all very graphic and brutal and isn't very nice sounding. But it's the truth and if we can't tell the truth in church, then we have no chance at redemption.

I have had people tell me throughout my 30 years of ministry that they come to church to feel good and don't want to hear messages which they deem as negative and downers. What I've explained to people who have expressed those feelings is that "That's not the Gospel..." and if any week of the liturgical year speaks to the idea that we should not always feel comfortable, it's this one...

The fickleness of humanity is on full display in the scripture story of this week. The loud voices of the crowds who wanted to feel good and celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, quickly turned to jeers of "crucify him" a few days later. In his act of coming to the political capital of the region, riding on a humble donkey, Jesus came to turn society and the political as well as the religious world on their heads... His life and ministry, culminating in this week's events, served to ask people to take a chance, to risk everything... to stand up and walk away from what was comfortable and safe, from patterns which had enslaved them... all for the chance of transformation and new life – even eternal life... Jesus' constant message was that their very lives depended on it.

Jesus knew that human sin ~ whether individual or collective ~ can stop us dead in our tracks. It paralyzes us. It disconnects us from others and makes us think that we are not intricately interwoven with all aspects of society. It makes white people think that we are somehow better than any other race... Sin makes us blame other people for the ills we face. It says that individualism vs. the community good is what's important. That hard work and the idea of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps is an equal opportunity idea. It also makes us want to say it's us vs. them vs. the idea that "I am responsible to do my part to change what has been broken in society... and to look to Jesus as the example of the way to do that. Remember, as we will see later this week, Jesus was killed for such thoughts.

But sitting back and doing nothing is NOT an option. (My high school English teacher, Miss Krouskup, would not like me using a double negative ~ but it makes a point here).

We MUST not succumb to being the frozen in our tracks, in spite of everything which tells us that change is not possible.

Some of you may be wondering why we had 2 scripture passages... and one seemingly has nothing to do with Palm Sunday. It occurred much earlier in Jesus' ministry. But there is a correlation...

The words of Jesus we heard in this week's healing story were many, but let us home in on two words, "Take heart." The French word for "heart" is "couer" and, besides its reference to the physical heart organ, it also means "courage." Certainly, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was a sign to people that they were worthy to be "saved" – the meaning of the cries of "hosanna!" Courage in the face of difficulty, and care in the face of being disheartened, go hand-in-hand.

Healing is not always an absence of illness, but rather a trust that God is holding our brokenness and we can move on in life with assurance, making beauty in the midst of hard times.

A clergy friend of mine says he is reading Howard Thurman's autobiography, ***With Head and Heart*** during Lent. Thurman, of course was an American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. He penned many books and has a list of "quotable bits," but there is a lot more to him than "***The Work of Christmas***," which our choir has sung that many times.

My friend said this, "***With Head and Heart*** has blessed me tremendously. Among many other things, Thurman was the first African American to meet Rabindranath Tagore (a favorite poet of mine since childhood) and Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to India. When he and his wife, author, historian, and civil rights activist Sue Bailey Thurman, went to India they stayed in a building with open doors and windows, and for the sake of ventilation, walls that did not reach the roof. A friend came by to give them advice – do not eat fresh, unpeeled or uncooked fruit or vegetables, suspect all drinking water, and keep a flashlight under your pillow so when you get up in the night you can make a circle of light where your feet go and not step on scorpions or snakes.

When the friend left, Howard sat in deep reflection. Sue told him they should go to bed because the next day would be very busy. He replied, "Give me a few more minutes. I am conditioning my nervous system so that after tonight, until the end of the journey, it will be impossible for me to inadvertently step out of bed without first making a circle of light to guide me."

I understand the scripture about making clearly visible the things that poison us as individuals and as a society, but I think that a profound exercise is always having a circle of light so that we are not bitten.

Maybe if the crowds had trusted that healing ~ both individual and communal healing ~ really was an option, they wouldn't have needed to scream so loudly. Maybe the same is true today.

May God's circle of light guide us continually through this week of self-examination and repentance ~ even as it feels uncomfortable ~ so that we may travel on through to Resurrection.

As we continue to shift our energy from the jubilant shouts of the crowds on Palm Sunday to the accusatory shouts of Holy Week, let us consider the words of our meditative anthem, sung by Kimberli Render.