

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday 2018

Mark 1: 1-11

“A March for Our Lives”

So, as I mentioned earlier, we printed the Palm Sunday story from Matthew when the version we read this year is from Mark. If you followed along, you could see that it is basically the same story but there are a few details that are different.

The emphasis in the Gospel of Mark is on the route of the march into Jerusalem. The march starts at the Mount of Olives, and goes down the road that leads straight to the Temple. That’s where the march ends—at the Temple.

And in the days after the march, Jesus makes it clear that the Palm Sunday march was just the beginning. He throws out the money changers in the Temple. The religious leaders challenge his authority. And, in an incident that could easily get overlooked in all that happens in the days after this march, Jesus holds up a widow—who is giving her last thin dime as an offering—he lifts her up as a counter example to the ways of the powers that be. He says, essentially, “She is the one who is truly praising God.”

Along with a number of you here—and more than 800,000 other people—I was at the March for Our Lives yesterday. We started with a gathering at First Trinity Lutheran Church—our bishop was there—and a church full of other people. From First Trinity, we headed to the march—which morphed into a rally because there were so many people that there was no room to march. It was like nothing else I have ever been a part of—there is so much I could say but the short version is that I am in awe and filled with hope in the ways that God is raising up young people to lead us.

It was a deeply spiritual experience. And, as I think about what it means, what difference it will make—I have to honestly say I don’t know. But there is something happening that is bigger than us—something that feels new and fresh—and free of the fear that has kept us captive for so long.

I believe this same thing might have been going on so many years ago, on that first Palm Sunday march into Jerusalem. Just like 100s of 1000s of people came from all over the country to DC yesterday, throngs of people were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Scholars estimate that there could have been as many as 3 million pilgrims there.

And all of these people are focused on the story of Passover—the story of God leading the Hebrew people out of slavery and into freedom. Yes, they are living under the cruel rule of the Romans—but they’ve got *freedom* on their minds.

Surely, there are pilgrims there from Galilee—and people from other places who have seen Jesus up close. People who have heard and seen something that is new and fresh and real and feels like freedom.

So, they line up along that road from the Mount of Olives to the seat of religious power. And all along the way, they are cheering and waving and throwing their cloaks and branches in the road. They're shouting—shouting like people shout chants at a rally—Hosanna—God saves! Hosanna—Blessed is the one who comes in the name of Lord!

It's all joy and hope—but Jesus knows it's more complicated than that. Jesus knows the struggle and suffering that are inevitable on the path where this march is headed.

Yesterday, at the March for Our Lives, that was another thing that struck me. What was going on emotionally was extremely complex. It seemed to me that a lot of our primary human emotions were intensely present. I was with some very close friends—one of whom came from town right next to Sandy Hook—and we moved between crying and cheering.

And, as I've been reflecting on it, praise—authentically human praise--brings together both joy and grief in some form. In just a minute we'll be praising God, using the ancient words of 3 psalms. What I notice in these psalms is that they blend together praise and confession. They tell the story of the way that God has been so faithful—so life-giving—and we, the people, have fallen so short. We forget what God has done—and maybe in our time, we fail to even notice what God is doing.

Acknowledging the ways we mess up, I think might paradoxically be our most honest form of praise. Because when we do that—when we come before God as we honestly are—in the humility of who we are and how we are—We actually acknowledge the greatness of God—which is what praise is all about.

Teresa of Avila, one of the great saints of the church, reminds us not to forget in whose presence we are praying. Hear these words: "Let me not be overwhelmed by your presence, silenced by my frailty, or reduced as I so often am to muttering familiar phrases to overcome my speechlessness. Accept me as I am with what I have to give. You do not lead us all by the same path. Here in your presence, take my yearning to speak with you and what words I have, and make of them a prayer worthy of your love for me. Amen."

Yesterday, Emma Gonzalez, the teen who has become the most prominent spokesperson for the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas students, did something so unexpected. She spoke briefly, naming her classmates who had been killed, and saying the very ordinary things each of them would never be able to do again. And then

she stood in front of the microphone in silence. Initially, the crowd didn't understand—and people chanted her name to encourage her because they thought she was overcome. But she kept her silent vigil in front of the microphone for 6 minutes and 20 seconds—the length of time it took to kill her 17 classmates.

With silence, she honored them.

Silence is also one way that we praise God. Following the Apostles' Creed today, we will have a time of silent prayer. Sitting in awe before God. Honoring God with our silence—our willingness to stop everything else and be in God's presence. In the humility of silence, we give voice to the greatness of God—One who is beyond our complete understanding—but who is still knowable.

As we enter this Holy Week march, may we each know more deeply—each in his or her own way—the God who is revealed to us in Jesus. And in our steps of struggle, grief and joy, may we praise God. Amen.