

"Yes, we live in challenging times...and we keep celebrating...why?"

Fourth sermon in Lenten "Yes, And..." series: Challenge + Celebration

Yes, life pushes you to your limits...and celebration can come in unexpectedly places.

Luke 19:28-40 (CEV)

During this Lenten season, I've been thinking a lot about these two spiritual practices of Challenge + Celebration. And while it may not always be the case, it seems to me that challenges choose us, and we choose celebrations.

Meaning: life is full of challenges, and we really don't ask for those things, do we? They just come. Job loss or the loss of a loved one. A diagnosis. Family strife. Depression. A natural disaster. A hurtful comment. A flat tire. Boiler issues at your house – to the tune of \$1,600! (that was Damon and me this week). Taxes. You name it!

We would never choose these challenges for ourselves. And yet, life is full of them. It's because of that, I think, that we have created rituals of celebration. Ways to be intentionally happy about things in our life like birthdays

and anniversaries and graduations. We've even created celebrations out of things that may or may not need to be celebrated. Did you know today, April 14, is National Ex-Spouse Day, National Gardening Day, National Dolphin Day, National Reach-As-High-As-You-Can Day, and National Pecan Day? I kid you not. Those are all assigned to April 14. And you just thought it was National-Day-Before-Your-Taxes-Are-Due-Day!!

The bottom line is, because a lot of life is challenging and because almost everything in life that is challenging we don't choose for ourselves...we choose to create celebrations to help us make it through. Why? Because we can control them. Celebrations give us agency in the midst of angst and anxiety. And so, we celebrate – whenever we get the chance. And sometimes we have to

make ourselves celebrate even if we don't feel festive...and I kind of see Palm Sunday like that. It's a day of celebrations sandwiched in between the challenges of Lent behind us and the ultra-challenges of Holy Week ahead. So this Palm Sunday, I hope we can be inspired and motivated – even if just for a day. Maybe Palm Sunday can serve as a jump start for you if you feel stalled out in your faith.

This processional story is featured in all four gospels. It definitely has all kinds of variations. You'll notice in today's version – we're missing the children, the palms, and the hosannas – but we still have the donkey, the cloaks, and the praising disciples. And we still have – of course – Jesus...and some stones. No other version has stones. We'll come back to those later. To me, they are the ultimate inspiration.

Now it's a big deal that this story made it in to all four gospels. The Christmas story (the story of Jesus' birth) only makes the cut for two of the gospels. The Lord's Prayer, which we've recited every

Sunday for 2,000 years+ also only makes the cut for just two gospels. The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son each only appear in one gospel. The beatitudes – you know the “*blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor*” passage – that only made the cut for two gospels as well. But the Palm Sunday story – the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem – is in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.²

Why? Well, a donkey may be a humble way for Jesus to make an entrance, but that humility didn't prevent a whole lot of hoop-la from happening around him. People took notice of this parade. So much so that some wonder if we really got the birth of the church all wrong. Maybe the beginning of the church wasn't at Pentecost, maybe it was really Palm Sunday.³

Now, hear this out, because it's an intriguing thought. One pastor puts it this way: “*Palm Sunday is the day the followers of Jesus grew up, found their voices, summoned their*

² Rev. Dr. Nancy Taylor, “Players and Protagonists in the Kingdom of God,” *Day1* (March 20, 2016),

accessed on April 14, 2019 at <http://day1.org/7153-players-and-protagonists-in-the-kingdom-of-god>.

³ Taylor, *ibid*.

courage, and assumed their role as witnesses to God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Palm Sunday is the day Jesus' followers stepped out onto the world stage in earnest as players and protagonists in the [kindom] of God.”⁴

You see, until this moment, the followers of Jesus had been just that: followers, largely passive as they traipsed after Jesus all over Palestine: *“When he argued with civil and religious officials, they watched, tense and riveted. When he defended a prostitute, they gasped. When he conversed in public with a woman from Samaria, they winced. When he defied the Sabbath laws, they cringed. When he declared that the last shall be first, the first last, and the rich poor, they glanced around guardedly to see who was listening. When he kissed lepers and healed those with broken bodies, they whispered in fascinated awe.”⁵*

But something different happens on this day. As they enter Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus begin to take on their role as leaders. And they do so at a moment when the whole world was watching – in the

capital city of Jerusalem during the annual festival of Passover.

To set the scene a bit: during the annual Passover festival, the city is abuzz with visitors from all over the nearby world. It might look like Times Square during spring break – or any week for that matter – full of tourists, full of merchants trying to sell stuff to said tourists, just full of people period. Packed. Everyone is excited and bustling around. People are out and about. If you do something out in the public arena – it's gonna be seen.

And to keep the peace in all this, Roman legions – in their helmets, gleaming armor, and atop their noble horses – patrol the streets. They want it to be very clear who is in charge in Jerusalem.

And amazingly in the midst of this power display, the disciples do not shy away from Jesus or fall asleep on him as they'll do later this week in the garden. They don't deny that they know him, as Peter will do later this week. They don't betray him, as Judas will do later this week. For this moment – they cheer, out loud and proud, for Jesus –

⁴ Taylor, *ibid.*

⁵ Taylor, *ibid.*

their king, their Messiah – the anointed one, and they proclaim the *kindom* of peace that he has come to bring.

And this is huge because there's a powerful display of authority that is present in Jerusalem by the Roman soldiers. And on Palm Sunday, the disciples aren't scared away. Nor does this power intimidate them or silence them.

Quite the opposite is true. They actually find their voices – they yell, they sing, they praise...so much so that they annoy the Pharisees, some of their own Jewish leaders of the day, and Jesus sticks up for them saying – essentially – if the disciples stop truth-telling then these stones will tell the truth – because the truth of God's *kindom* cannot be silenced. It is in the air everywhere. The truth is here this day – riding on a donkey, cloaked with praise. The new *kindom* of God is moving in...and is here to stay. The good news cannot and will not ever go away.

Really, it was the first march of protest by Jesus-followers. Because make no mistake,

while they were praising Jesus – they were simultaneously protesting Caesar. They followed Jesus, and him alone. Not the Roman empire. They didn't know quite how much that would cost them – or what they were about to lose – but it's probably all the better...they may never have raised their voices if they knew the consequences. (*What is it about the fear of consequences that squelches courage?*)

The disciples make it clear in their shouts of praise and hosanna that “their allegiance was not to Pax Romana – an uneasy peace achieved by force, but to Pax Christi – a peace to which we are invited, but never coerced, a peace which emanates from the very heart of God, a peace that passes all human understanding.”⁶

And this allegiance to peace, and not to power, is probably why this story made it into all four gospels. A baby being born to poor parents in a stable in a small town may not make front page news. But a band of ragtag, pilgrim people shouting praises and songs to a leader other than Caesar – that

⁶ Taylor, *ibid.*

definitely would make front page news.

And so because Palm Sunday is a day where the followers of Jesus really are unapologetically following God, and not any human system claiming to be god-like...that's why some are saying it's the day "the church became the church." Because on this day the disciples finally "get" who Jesus is – even if they don't fully understand what is about to happen to him. On this day, "the church is born, not with wind and fire but with courage and conviction."⁷ It's a Pentecostal Palm Sunday!

Of course, *we* know that this moment of celebration and proclamation doesn't last. The week that is to come is going to be brutal. It is full of challenges, for Jesus most definitely...but also for the disciples. They will be tried and tested again and again...and their allegiance to Jesus will be questioned. And sometimes they will fail that test. Both by speaking up and by staying silent. The only constant in this rollercoaster of a week that is Holy Week is Jesus' love...and it never fails, it never forgets

anyone, and it forgives everyone. That love is the heartbeat of Holy Week.

The word "holy" means "set apart" – and this week is set apart because of all that happens in such a short period of time. It's as if some of the absolute most difficult life challenges and circumstances of suffering were taken and compressed into one short week and happened to one person and his close friends and family. But as you open up the week, and fan it out page by page, day by day, and begin to live it – you can feel that heartbeat of love growing stronger...even as the challenges get deeper and the suffering more horrific.

Holy Week is like a microcosm of our lives. Because this is how our challenges in life feel, right? Many times when one thing seems to go wrong, another one follows, and pretty soon they are caving in on one another, leaving us feeling trapped and gasping for air, for space, for a reprieve, for a companion on the journey, for an ounce of good news. And then the good news comes...and opens up a space for us to breathe again, to see

⁷ Taylor, *ibid.*

the Light, to see Hope, to see and feel Joy, to be able to Celebrate...to be able to feel that heartbeat of Love.

So while it can feel odd to continue to celebrate an event that leads into the most agonizing and sorrowful week of our faith...when our leader (our supposed “king”) is brutally beaten and crucified on a cross...this day is important because we need this reminder of hope before the big miracle of Hope on Easter morning. In some ways, Palm Sunday is more relatable because even though it is powerful, it is fleeting – not lasting (like the resurrection). And often that’s how hope can feel...when we grasp it, it can be hard to keep ahold of. We have it one day and the next day it slips through our fingers.

It’s also more relatable to us perhaps because praising Jesus and proclaiming the *kindom* of God is the every day work we are called to do. That said, speaking up for truth and justice and love is not a cakewalk. There are moments of celebration, and there are perhaps many more moments of pain and persecution. But we cannot let go of the moments of celebration – for those are the

moments that keep us going, that remind us of our true nature and of the *kindom* dream God has for us. Without the floaties of celebration on our arms we would drown in the deadweight of despair. Celebration keeps us buoyant when life is crashing in on us beyond what we think we can handle.

And so even if it feels forced at times, we continue to celebrate and wave our palms. Even when we know the road ahead will be hard. We continue to celebrate even when we feel like ours are the only voices speaking up. We continue to celebrate even when all we can celebrate is that we have lived one more day through the challenge.

In the past several weeks, three African American Baptist churches in Louisiana were burned by arson – the fires set by a 21 year old white man: St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre, Louisiana burned down March 26; followed by Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas on April 2; and Mount Pleasant Baptist Church on April 4.

Pastor Gerald Toussaint of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church

said in press conference on Thursday morning: that he believed the three affected congregations will emerge stronger than before. “...*a lot of people want to make it a hate thing...Well we don’t represent hate...We represent love, togetherness, peace, longsuffering, hope...*”

[pick up palm and wave it as I continue to read his words...]

I can see him waving a palm as he goes on...describes the kingdom of God:

“...*That’s what we’re here for today, to say not just to our community but to our country: Be strong. Love one another. Be patient with one another. Help one another. Guide one another. Train up your children in the way they should go... We represent love, togetherness, peace, longsuffering, hope*”⁸

Can’t you just hear between those lines the hosannas of praise: “*Behold is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory to the highest!*” (Luke 19:38)

Pastor Toussaint said his church plans to rebuild and has received offers of help from all over the country: “*I’ve heard from pastors and ministers in the area that I’ve never talked to in my life...We are going to start a network within the community of pastors, preachers and churches to come together...These things turned out to be a wonderful thing..It started off a dark moment in our life, but I think with the rebuilding process you’re going to see some things in the future that’s going to be very bright for our churches...[there will be things we can celebrate in all of this.]*”⁹

We know the scare of a church fire here at Calvary, and that is disconcerting enough. But imagine if that fire had been set intentionally because of the color of the skin of our members or because of what we stood for or who we worshipped. As I processed this event with Pastor Eugene Downing at New Hope on Thursday morning, he expressed just how traumatic

⁸ Bob Allen, “Arrest brings closure for African-American Baptist churches hit by arson,” *Baptist News Global* (April 11, 2019), accessed on April 14, 2019 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/arrest-brings-closure->

[for-african-american-baptist-churches-hit-by-arson/#.XLMQqBNKiu4](https://baptistnews.com/article/arrest-brings-closure-for-african-american-baptist-churches-hit-by-arson/#.XLMQqBNKiu4).

⁹ Allen, *ibid*.

this is for African Americans. Because for African Americans, the church building has not just been a place where people have sought *spiritual solace* – although it has definitely always been that and will continue to be that, but the church has also literally been a place of *physical safety* when no other place in our country was safe for them. It harkens back to a message of “you are not wanted here.” And so when the African American church is attacked, “*it reminds us all of a dark past in our country that really still haunts us today,*” as Louisiana Governor John Bell Edwards said.¹⁰

In the midst of that haunting, Pastor Toussaint’s message is all the more powerful because it is a voice of hope that could have very easily been one of the voices shouting in that Palm Sunday processional parade 2,000+ years ago. A voice of hope in the midst of despair...a voice that some people try to silence and Jesus says – “*No...that voice will not be silenced...let those voices speak and shout and scream for justice and peace until it comes.*” And if these voices

aren’t shouting, these stones will be.

Maybe we reenact this Palm Sunday processional each year because we must. Because we can’t ever forget the moments when Jesus’ disciples raised their voices proclaiming him as Prince of Peace over and against a regime that flaunted power over peace. And we need to practice raising our own voices of praise and protest – for whatever injustice we see before us. Because when the time comes for us to raise our voices – and let’s be honest – the time is now – we cannot be silent.

We should never wonder whether what Jesus said about those stones is literally true...you know... “*Well, now, would the stones actually shout if we stopped shouting?*”...

I hope we never get to that point of discovery because we should be asking ourselves instead – how are we proclaiming the love of God and the liberating news of the gospel that Jesus preached in his very first sermon in Luke 4:

“*God’s Spirit is on me;*

¹⁰ Allen, *ibid.*

*he's chosen me to preach the
Message of good news to the
poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to
prisoners and recovery of sight
to the blind,
To set the burdened and
battered free,
to announce, "This is God's
year to act!" (Luke 4:18-19,
The Message)*

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on
that donkey for all people...for
all voices...yes, even for those
voices that would ultimately
shout "*Crucify him! Crucify
him!*" His response? "*Father,
forgive them, for they know not
what they do.*"

Sometimes we don't know
what we're doing. But, you
know, most of the time we do.
We do know what is right. We
do know what the next right
thing to do is – and we just
need the courage to speak up
and act out. We need some of
that Palm Sunday Pentecostal
fire flowing through our veins.

This story in Luke leaves us
alongside Jesus' disciples
shouting and praising Jesus as
he makes his way to Jerusalem.
As we enter this Holy Week
and turn our faces to Jerusalem
with Jesus, I invite you to use
this time of silence to think

about how you can make your
voice of faith heard.

How can Christ give you the
courage you need to live out
your convictions?

And if you're weighed down by
so many challenges right now
that you can't even think about
courage or convictions, then
gently ask yourself this: what
can you celebrate in the midst
of all your challenges?

What is the promise of Palm
Sunday for you today?

I leave you with the words
theologian Frederick Buechner
wrote about this day:

*"Despair and hope. They travel
the road to Jerusalem together,
as together they travel every
road we take - despair at what
in our madness we are bringing
down on our own heads and
hope in him who travels the
road with us and for us and
who is the only one of us who is
not mad. Hope in the King who
approaches every human heart
like a city.*

*And it is a very great hope as
hopes go and is well worth all
our singing and dancing and
palm waving because not even
death can prevail against this*

*King and not even the end of
the world, when end it does,
will be the end of him and of
the mystery and majesty of his
love. Blessed be he...*¹¹...Jesus
Christ our Lord.

And blessed be we, his
followers, his voice, his
heartbeat in the world today.

May that beat march us on...

Amen.

¹¹ Frederick Buechner, "The Things That Make For Peace," *FrederickBuechner.com* (posted March 20, 2016), accessed on April 14, 2019 at

<http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2016/4/7/the-things-that-make-for-peace>.