

Greetings, friends.

Somebody recently asked me if the church was closed. I said no. The church is not closed. Our building is closed. Groups are not gathering in order to help keep our community safe. But the church is not closed. The church is a people; the living body of Christ. Living love, justice, and peace in community. No, the church is definitely not closed.

It has been heartwarming to hear all of the stories of how people are looking after each other. How communities are finding new ways to connect, and to encourage one another. I must admit... I have teddy bears in my windows, too. In fact, I love how people are changing from using the phrase "social distancing" to something like "physical distancing". Because we are social beings. We're just finding new ways of being there for each other.

And, no, it's not always easy. Many have made great sacrifices already, and it looks as if we will be called to do even greater things in the near future. But we will do it. Together.

This Sunday will be Palm Sunday. It will feel strange to not physically be together, and worship, and sing the hymns we sing once a year while waving palm branches. It is the day we recall Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, and it serves as the beginning of our Holy Week as we move towards the end of our Lenten journey, gathering at the foot of the cross, preparing ourselves for Easter. Here's the passage of scripture:

¹² The next day the large crowd that had come to the Passover Festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the King of Israel!"¹⁴ Jesus found a donkey and rode on it, just as the scripture says,¹⁵ "Do not be afraid, city of Zion! Here comes your king, riding on a young donkey." (John 12:12-15 GNT)

I enjoy the spiritual experience that Palm Sunday offers; the call to discipleship, the challenge. The kid in me likes the palm waving and the pageantry. The adult in me feels a little uneasy as I look ahead to the rest of the week's story. But this event itself is a significant moment.

Much has been said about this day of two parades. Yup, two. We know the one we celebrate on Palm Sunday, with Jesus riding into the Holy City humbly on a donkey while his followers shout praise and wave branches. But, although there is no mention of it in the Bible, history records another parade happening at the same time at the other end of the city.

Remember, at the time, the country is occupied by the Roman Empire. Pontius Pilate – who enters this story later this week – is the governor, representing the Emperor. Pilate doesn't live in Jerusalem; he lives in the palace in Caesarea, the seat of government on the Mediterranean coast. But whenever there was a major Jewish festival – like Passover – Pilate made sure he was in Jerusalem with his army to be a strong presence for the Empire and remind people that no demonstration against the Roman government would be tolerated. This was especially important during Passover – a festival that celebrates liberation from another oppressive regime, in this case the Egyptians.

So, imagine Pontius Pilate arriving in Jerusalem the same time Jesus and his followers are entering from the other side. We've seen the movies; we have a clear image of what Pilate's parade would look like... rows and rows of soldiers carrying banners, decorated horses and chariots, trumpets, and swords. Lots of swords. The Empire is here.

Now, imagine once again that little humble parade on the other side of town. The hope. The faith. And, quite frankly, the guts.

This, for me, puts Palm Sunday into a different light. Gives us a new perspective. Two parades. One defined by fear and intimidation. One of hope, humility, and promise.

At which parade do you see yourself?

Everyday in our world, and especially at this time, we are called to make a choice. Who will we decide to be? What path will we follow? What will we stand up for? Which parade will we follow?

John quotes the prophet Zechariah (the text above) who spoke of two kingdoms... one of violence and one of peace. He wrote of the leader who would ride a donkey as a sign of humility and peace. One who would teach of a new strength. Instead of might, fear, and force... it would be about love, compassion, justice, and hope.

Journey on, my friends. Make choices that proclaim God's kingdom. Show that we're all in this together. We are not alone. We live in God's world.

Be well.

Rev. Steve