

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Long ago in my youth, one Palm Sunday coincided with a severe blizzard. My family was one of a very few who were close enough to church to make it to worship that day. I don't remember the exact number of people who made it, but there were no more than eight of us. Normal attendance was 200 or more.

More than forty years later, this Palm Sunday is replacing that one as the strangest and, in some ways, starkest in my life experience. I suspect the same may be true for each of you as well.

All those years ago, it was right for so many people to stay home. To be gathered in one place was not worth the hazards of traveling in winter blizzard conditions. The life that God raises us to live is worth more than putting ourselves and our neighbors in unnecessary danger.

Today, under the even more dangerous conditions of the COVID-19 virus, we must act with similar prudence and care for one another. As much as we may wish otherwise, it is indeed right and salutary that we remain in our homes. The palms and Easter eggs are not essential and not what unite us as church. What unites us as church, now and always, is that the gospel is preached with one accord and that the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word (*Augsburg Confession*, Article VII).

I hope and trust you will find the gospel in today's Palm Sunday worship devotions. Meanwhile, be confident that in the sacrament of Holy Baptism you remain sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever. No physical or social distance is ever a barrier to that promise from God.

Together in Christ,
Rich

Prepare for Worship

Set out on a table in front of you a green branch, a house plant, or simply a drawing of a leaf or branch.

Today, we encounter the paradox that defines our faith: Jesus Christ is glorified king and humiliated servant. We too are full of paradox: like Peter, we fervently desire to follow Christ, but find ourselves afraid, denying God. We wave palms in celebration today as Christ comes into our midst, and we follow with trepidation as his path leads to death on the cross. Amid it all we are invited into this paradoxical promise of life through Christ's broken body and abundant outpoured love. We begin this week that stands at the center of the church year, anticipating the completion of God's astounding work.

Let Us Be Gathered

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

As we unite across physical and social distance on this Palm Sunday, I invite you to join me in listening to, humming alongside, and maybe even sing out loud with one of the Roanoke College choirs as they sing "Ride On, King Jesus." Roanoke College is located in Virginia and is one of 26 colleges and universities affiliated with the ELCA. Here is the link: https://youtu.be/OwjB-zTvW_Q

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

For these last weeks in Lent, Vicky's inspiration for our shared song of praise is *On a Hill Far Away* (also known to us as *The Old Rugged Cross*). While we are unable to join together in singing at this time, there is a wonderful improvisation on this beloved hymn that we can join together in hearing. I invite you to take a few minutes to listen to the video at this link: <https://youtu.be/8w68ugZntRA>

Let us pray.

Everlasting God,
in your endless love for the human race
you sent our Lord Jesus Christ to take on our nature
and to suffer death on the cross.
In your mercy enable us to share in his obedience to your will
and in the glorious victory of his resurrection,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from the Psalms:

- ⁹Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble;
my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my throat and my belly.
¹⁰For my life is wasted with grief, and my years with sighing;
my strength fails me because of affliction, and my bones are consumed.
¹¹I am the scorn of all my enemies, a disgrace to my neighbors, a dismay to my acquaintances;
when they see me in the street they avoid me.
¹²Like the dead I am forgotten, out of mind;
I am as useless as a broken pot.
¹³For I have heard the whispering of the crowd; fear is all around;
they put their heads together against me; they plot to take my life.
¹⁴But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord.
I have said, "You are my God."
¹⁵My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.
¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love." (Psalm 31)

A reading from the Philippians:

- ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2)

The Holy Gospel according to Matthew:

¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21)

Reflection on the Readings

"¹When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil."

At 12:01 am on Monday morning, Joplin and all of Missouri will officially fall under a stay-at-home order. For most of us, this will mean that we continue to do what we have been doing for the past couple of weeks: remaining physically distant from neighbors, friends, family, co-workers, and others in our community. Together with updated healthcare guidelines, it means that when we cannot avoid going out — to buy groceries, to do essential work, to achieve necessary exercise, to purchase medication — we will see one another wearing face masks as we try to corral the spread of this current plague-level virus.

And so, yes, as the church catholic (with a small "c", that means "universal") enters Holy Week this day, it does very much seem as if the whole of the city and even the whole of the world are in turmoil.

But it is a strange kind of turmoil, isn't it? At least for me, it is. I usually think of "turmoil" as being crowded and noisy, rushing and even violent. And for many people, I think it exactly that kind of turmoil they are experiencing — perhaps especially for healthcare professionals, for doctors, nurses, hospital staff and administrators, and first responders who are working desperately to provide care and healing. And yet for others of us, the turmoil of these days can look like the exact opposite as we bunker in our homes — too quiet, too inactive, too calm, too much time sitting in front of a computer screen while attending online meetings.

With too much of this, though, our minds and our bodies transform it into something else. It becomes disquiet. Restlessness. Uneasiness. Agitation. An experience of *Sturm und Drang* as the people of Germany might call it — storm and stress. And so there it is, even if it feels different — turmoil in the whole of our lives.

The promise of today's gospel is that Jesus enters into such turmoil. Long ago, he entered into the turmoil of Jerusalem as the city prepared for a Passover celebration. Today, Jesus enters into the turmoil of our COVID-19 impacted lives as we and this world prepare for a Paschal celebration.

And as Jesus enters our lives, we shout out:

Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

Hosanna means "save us." It is a plea that echoes across the centuries.

Today, in this moment, there certainly are people who need to be saved from the disease that surrounds us, even if it costs something. Even if it involves the costs of discipleship – the cost of humbling ourselves, the cost of becoming obedient, the cost of being a servant to humanity, the cost of emptying ourselves for the sake of others. Even if it involves the cost of staying at home and giving up palms and missing out on sharing the peace and longing achingly for Easter Sunday alleluias – so that others may live!

"Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." This call by the crowds in their city of turmoil is also God's promise for us living in the shadow of the cross and in the turmoil of today's world. What this promise means is that there are unexpected blessings for those who live and pray in God's word:

There is hope when all seems hopeless.

There is peace beyond our understanding.

There is love beyond measure – it is abundant!

And there is life beyond death.

Let us now proclaim our faith in that promise of life in the words of our baptismal creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

God of mercy, awaken your church to new proclamations of your faithfulness. By your Spirit, give us bold and joyful words to speak, that we sustain the weary with the message of your redemption. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of mercy, quiet the earth where it trembles and shakes. Protect vulnerable ecosystems, threatened habitats, endangered species, and human communities. Prosper the work of scientists, epidemiologists, and researchers who find ways to restore creation to health and wholeness. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of mercy, drive away fear and anger that cause us to turn against one another. Give courage to leaders who seek liberation for the oppressed. Bring peace and hope to those who are in prison and those who face execution. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of mercy, send your saving help to all who suffer abuse, insult, discrimination, or contempt. Heal the wounded. Comfort the dying. Bring peace to those suffering the effects of COVID-19 and other chronic or terminal illnesses. Tend to all who cry out for relief, especially Vallie, LaVaune, Patty, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, Marlene, and all those we name. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of mercy, when we breathe our last, you raise us to eternal life. With all your witnesses in heaven and on earth, let us boldly confess the name of Jesus Christ, our resurrection and our hope. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Now is the acceptable time.
Now is the day of salvation.
Holy God, speaking, spoken, and inspiring,
+ bless you, unbind you, and send you in love and in peace. Amen.

Go in peace. Share the good news.

As we proceed into the Holy Week that is ahead, let us be sent with this hymn that recalls Jesus' great humility, servanthood, and emptying of himself for the life of others.

Choral *a capella* arrangement of "Ah, Holy Jesus": <https://youtu.be/pR2OAUqAijM?t=8>
(Music arrangement © 2013 Augsburg Fortress.)