Palm Sunday  
April 5, 2020  
*Amid the pandemic*  
St. Paul’s, Syracuse from home—Rev. Kathy Major

I don’t usually preach on Palm Sunday, so this is a very different celebration for me – but it is a very different celebration for all of us…

Every other Palm Sunday we would be in church remembering the events of the gospels, we would experience the beginning of Holy Week, blessing the palms and shouting our ‘hosannas’, waving our palms as we make our way around the church and into our usual pews in the nave. I’m not sure that St. Paul’s has a tradition of marching outside the church, but some parishes I’ve served do just that – go out from the parish hall and the blessing of the palms and process around the church building or around the block, depending on the weather and the location of the church.

We move liturgically from the joy of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem into the somber and moving story of the passion. We move from shouting ‘hosanna’ into shouting ‘crucify him.’ And we remember – we are those people, those folks who both revel in the goodness of God and then in our next breath join the voices of denial, “I do not know the man.”

I don’t usually preach on Palm Sunday because the liturgy says everything that needs to be said – usually. But this year is no usual year. This Palm Sunday is, I pray, unique to our lives and never to be repeated.

The best liturgy allows us to make the past present. Most years it seems right that we are left at the sealed tomb, exhausted from the highs and lows of the readings, hungry to get to next Sunday and Easter morning. Most years of our lives we’re in much better shape emotionally than those first disciples.

This year, I think we’re experiencing more of the anxiety the disciples had when Jesus decided to return to Judea in last week’s gospel reading of the raising of Lazarus – do you remember? It was Thomas who said “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” The disciples were on edge. After Jesus is taken in the garden, what do the faithful disciples do? ‘Then all the disciples deserted him and fled,’ Matthew says, which is exactly what Jesus had said would happen.

Our situation is different but we can now more easily put ourselves in those disciples’ shoes… We are staying at home, waiting with anxiety and some dread for the virus to arrive. If you have friends or family in any of the hotspots around the country, if you have friends or family who serve in the medical field, if you have friends or family doing ‘essential’ work, you may be more than anxious. You may be afraid.
We can understand why the disciples fled – they were afraid for their own lives. Jesus was the leader – would they be next in line for crucifixion? And we can understand how they end up in a locked room together – no one wanted to be alone in their fear.

We are alone together in our anxiety and fear. And where I would usually let the liturgy carry us in our discomfort on Palm Sunday, this year I want us to remember another part of the story…

My seminary professor, Dr. James Washington, would say that we are “Easter people in a Good Friday world.” I need that reminder this year. We are Easter people. We are resurrection people. We believe that out of death comes life.

Most years we need the reminder that we only get to Easter morning by going through Good Friday. This year Lent has been a month of Good Fridays and we’re not sure when it will end, not sure when we’ll see the dawn of new life.

We’re not sure when it will come, but it will come. And it will come whether we’re gathered together with the smell of spring flowers and the glories of organ and choir… or… if it will be more like the first Easter, without any church service, without a gathering of the saints, except for the group of disciples holed up together behind locked doors afraid for their lives.

But remember, the risen Christ makes himself known. That first Easter, Jesus didn’t appear with the smell of spring flowers hanging in the air, with the strains of the organ playing the first hymn, or the glory of the choir. Jesus met Mary Magdalen alone in the garden as she wept. Jesus showed up in the locked room with the disciples and told them not to be afraid. Jesus walked with the sorrowful disciples making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Jesus appears to us no matter where we’re found, whether we are full of faith or full of fear or full of sorrow.

Where is God in this suffering? Where is God in our anxiety and fear? Where is God in this world of pain and sorrow? Here. Here with us. Walking with us through this Lent, through Palm Sunday and into Good Friday, for as long as this Friday lasts. Easter will come. New life will arise.

God of the present moment, God who in Jesus stills the storm and soothes the frantic heart; bring hope and courage to all of us who wait or work in uncertainty. Bring hope that you will make us the equal of whatever lies ahead. Bring us courage to endure what cannot be avoided, for your will is health and wholeness; you are God, and we need you. Amen.

-Adapted from New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 765