

Palm Sunday Sermon: A Parade of Gospel Stories

Mark 11:1-11

3/24/24

Yesterday, I drove to the New London Hospitality Center in pelting rain to pick up our guest speaker, Catherine. Church member, Dana Dixon, connected us. We'd spoken over the phone first and Catherine said, "You can't miss me, I'll be the brunette with a cane!"

Pulling into the parking lot towards the entrance of the Center, I decided to walk over to the front door and past a large tent where guests were waiting under cover with all of their belongings. It was wet, cold and smoky.

I rang the buzzer and was let into the main entrance. Catherine was putting her coat on and greeted me warmly with an "Are you ready for me?"

Last night as you know was our *Sharing Humanity Sleep Out* and Catherine had agreed to tell her story. 'Cause of the weather, it became a sleep-in of course! With teenagers and adults sharing pizza together around our tables in fellowship hall, Catherine let us into the challenges and resiliency that have made up her life journey; decades of addiction, time in and out of York prison, medical challenges, inability to manage work and keep up her apartment, recovery programs and in recent days, a temporary room at the Center and a brighter future.

The Life of Catherine as we discovered is an ongoing gospel story, And for a little while, we were part of that story, too.

In preparation for our meeting, I was thinking of that moment in the very beginning when people who don't know each other start to reveal themselves. We're blank canvases at first and most of the time remain stereotypes and stigmas seen only at a distance; another homeless person with bags on the sidewalk here or a sullen teenager in the corner over there.

And then...once a real conversation, a sacred conversation, unfolds, the truth of who one is can emerge, our humanness is bridged, the person becomes enfleshed in the very real. And that is a holy moment.

I think that's some of what we experienced last night. And in a few minutes you'll hear from some of our middle and high school students about their perspective. about what has stayed with them about how we share humanity with one another and can take care of each other, especially someone whose home is their car or to temporary shelter.

We reminded one another last night, too, of what Jesus taught his community in his time... that whenever we are with one another, feed one another, clothe one another, visit with one another, respect one another, we are being with Jesus. WE are in fact, changing the world from a stark place into a hopeful one of kinship and kindness.

The contemporary poet, Christian Wiman, in his new book, *Zero at the Bone* has a chapter entitled *Joy, Help, Joy, Help, Joy Help*. That to me

is the story of Palm Sunday at the opening gates where we meet Jesus today.

The exuberant entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem, marks the beginning of this holy, unholy week. It is a crucible moment at the Eastern Gate. What unfolds as the week progresses is a blend of tragedy and triumph, joy and cruelty that can inspire, provoke, and challenge us if we let the stories in to co-mingle with our own. (Amy JL) There is Joy, yes. And the need for much help.

This morning we'll wave our palm branches high, and shout like that ancient crowd surrounding Jesus, Hosanna, "hosannah," which people shout as Jesus enters Jerusalem (Mark 11:9); meaning, "Save Now!" or "Save, please!"

Save now, Save please! The cries heard around the world today from Gaza to Haiti to those seeking a safe place to sleep here in CT.

This humble gospel parade is found in all four of the gospels and told in 4 different ways. The writers all have parts they emphasize, like 4 different paintings of the same subject. Its....essentially a piece of street theater, a political protest dramatizing an ancient prophecy: the long-awaited divine monarch arrives on a humble donkey, announcing "peace to the nations" following the prophecy of Zechariah from the Old Testament.(Zech 9:9-10).

Shout hosanna! Save Us Now!

While on the other side of the city, military parades and threatening violence growing ever closer .

If you're interested in learning more, I recommend Prof. Amy Jill-Levine's book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*. Levine is very good at clarifying biblical myths, highlighting questions and lifting up the ways contemporary readers miss what was true about the Jewish community at the time and what is not (and the misreadings by the Christian church over the centuries has led to wrong, persistent and even dangerous theologies and stereotypes, etc).

Levine writes, "Every time we read the Passion narratives, we become musicians ourselves, for we will always hear the text in a new key. Each time we read the text, we bring our own new selves to it—experiences, emotions, expectations. The story is a never-ending repository of inspiration and question."

Those in the Jerusalem of Jesus day were living under occupation as are many peoples around the world, Standing at the gate, Jesus knew, things were about to change. He knew, as Dr. Martin Luther King must have known, as Alexi Navalny probably knew, that death was imminent. As people of faith, as followers of the story, death doesn't have the final word...only Love does.

Soon enough, as we all know the humble parade of palms and hosannas will give way to the Passion narratives and shouts of "Crucify Him!"(Luke 23.21).

What are you seeing and hearing in this moment of your life? As we engage in the rituals and music of Passion Week. How might we enter into the gospel stories we read in a deeper, more meaningful way? What speaks to you -or doesn't?

As you know, we'll mark Maundy Thursday and share a Communion meal again in memory of the one Jesus offered with the disciples in the upper room at the Last Supper. After that service, the drama will intensify as we enter into the Purgatorio in our reading of Dante's 2nd part of the Divine Comedy. I'm looking forward to Dante's take on it all...and the journey up Mount Purgatorio with all of you!¹

I'D NOW LIKE TO INVITE OUR YOUTH GROUP STUDENTS UP TO SHARE THEIR REFLECTIONS WITH US...ITS THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO CATHERINE AND OUR TEENAGERS...

The psalmist sings,
Open to me the gates of justice,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks....

In that spirit I'd like to thank so many who made last night possible and meaningful for all who participated. Jolene Brant, Our Youth and Sunday School Coordinator, chaperones, Angela Mock, Kathy Sugland,

¹ As a former Catholic, I attended a catholic elementary school in Franklin Lakes, NJ. I gotta tell you, as a 4th grader, I learned more about purgatory and how you get there and how you get out of there to heaven than I did any other academic subject, math and geography in particular!

and Ross Higgins for sharing the bigger picture of homelessness in our region. Appreciation to Bill Belluzzi for pitching in making salad and also gratitude to the chaperones from the United Church of Higganum and Haddam who joined us with two of their teenagers.

Mostly, I want to thank our young people who dare to spend a Saturday night in church and be the change in the world !

The more we can offer one another ways of seeing justice and injustice through the gospel according to Catherine and one another,
The more we can meet the need, change the system and honor our humanity and divinity.

Amen.

REV. LAURA FITZPATRICK-NAGER