

Palm Sunday Sermon
Matthew 21:1-11
April 2, 2023
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Good morning, church! I am so thankful to be here with you. As we begin this morning, before I do a lot of talking, I wonder if you all would be willing to engage in a little reflection activity with. Don't worry! I won't make you share with a partner or come up to the podium – you don't even have to move at all. So, if you're willing, I invite you to find a posture that's comfortable, close your eyes...take a deep breath in and let it out...and in your mind, recall a time in which you felt joy. It can be as close or as far removed from right now as you want. It can be the first thing that comes to mind or you can scan your mind for a memory you want to revisit. And as identify that moment of you, I invite your to think a little further about why you would call this moment joyful. Was it a celebration like a birthday or a wedding? Was it something simple like a stroll through the park in your neighborhood? Who was there with you? Was anyone there with you? How do you know it was joy? Where in your body did you feel joy? Take a minute to revisit that moment...okay open your eyes. Hello! Welcome back.

I'm going to make good on my promise not to ask you to share but I do wonder what your moment of joy was. I'm curious what the circumstances surrounding it were. I wonder if for any of you, that moment was also connected another emotion like excitement or love or peace. I wonder if for some of you, that moment of joy was connected to a difficult emotion like sorrow or grief or pain.

I'm not sure about y'all but the concept of joy has been complicated for me to navigate. In the wake of tragedies like the recent murder of innocent children and educators in Nashville, legislation that disproportionately criminalizes queer expression while simultaneously allowing minors and anyone really, to purchase guns, assault rifles, with little to no training or reason for possessing weapons in the first place. When faced with the realities of a world heating up and people burning out quicker than we'd like to admit, late-stage capitalism exploiting those that its proponents have placed on the margins and rewarding the hoarders of wealth. In unpacking my own trauma and trying to make sense of some of the personal tragedies I've endured or hearing dear friends recount to me the ways that they have been harmed by people who claim a god with the same name as my own, how can I even consider the validity of joy, let alone stand up here and speak of it when outside these doors, around the corner in our neighborhood, and even within our very pews, there is such bleakness that persists. It almost feels offensive because standing next to a skyscraper of suffering, the notion of joy looks like a pebble. It seems to pale in comparison. It feels vapid, shallow, even silly as if possessing and embracing joy means we're not being serious about the very real afflictions of our world. Let's just take a minute to sit with that. To acknowledge the weight of the condition of our world. To notice where and how we're carrying that. Because we do carry it – in our minds, in our bodies, and in our souls. And as we do that, let me extend an invitation for us together, to explore the possibility that the triumphal

entry of Jesus shows us that the road to resistance, restoration, and redemption begins at the intersection of joy and adversity.

When I read this passage from Matthew, what immediately jumps out at me is that Jesus did not shy away from embracing both the pain and the party. Throughout the Gospels, as Jesus has been teaching, traveling, healing, and performing miracles, he has also been telling his disciples that there will come a day and an hour in which he will not be with them; that he is going away, and they cannot come with him. He has been telling them, warning them, trying to prepare them that he is going to die. In contrast, in this scene from Matthew 21, Jesus is preparing and entering Jerusalem for Passover –the feast of freedom - a remembrance of God’s deliverance. And it is a celebration! It’s a party – Jewish folks from all over the place are showing up to the Temple to partake in the festivities. It is a joyous occasion! But, For Jesus, this entrance into Passover is also his path to death. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of all those times he told his friends that he was going to be killed. As he makes his way into the party and is met by crowds cheering and shouting for him, he is also confronting the Roman empire that within a week’s time will nail him to a tree. It seems to me that Jesus had every reason to show up to that festival and silence the celebration. Those crowds were yelling “Hosanna”, believing that he was the Messiah they had been waiting for. They were expecting a King that would come in to conquer Rome on their behalf. The Indigenous Translation of the New Testament says Jesus, “This humble Chief did not fit the image of a conquering ruler. Instead of a warhorse, he rode in on a donkey colt”. The crowds did not know that Jesus would not come blazing in to stage a coup. But Jesus knew that. Jesus knew that restoration would not come in the form of radical military action but in the form of radical pain and suffering. And he so easily could have entered Jerusalem that day and quieted the crowds. He could have proclaimed “Stop! Quit your celebrating! You don’t understand how this ends, it’s not what you think. You don’t have reason to celebrate or shout for me – this ends in my death!” But he doesn’t do any of that. In fact, he does just the opposite. He arranges a ride and enters the celebration. But, why? Why does he embrace joy as part of the process? What good does joy do in a moment that ensures suffering?

If you’ve been following along and reading *This Here Flesh* by Cole Arthur Riley with us this Lenten season, you’ll know that the chapter and theme for this week is joy. Right at the start of the chapter, she says plainly that, “Joy which once felt as frivolous as love to me, has become a central virtue in my spirituality. I am convinced that if we are to survive the wait (W-A-I-T) of justice and liberation, we must become people capable of delight. And people who have been delighted in”. Jesus embodies this so beautifully in this scene – he’s been waiting for justice and liberation. He’s been saying all along that this moment would come and now it’s here. He knows that all hinges on him and the time to act is rapidly approaching. The crowds celebrating him have been waiting – fervently for generations for a messiah. The pressure is mounting, the stakes are high, that pinched feeling of waiting and knowing that they’re on the brink of release is palpable. So, in this moment, Jesus and the people delighting in and being delighted in by each other, gives relief to the pressure of waiting. Folks, what I’m saying is that Jesus embraced joy because it was necessary. Joy girded Jesus up so that he could face the road ahead.

What's also evident to me in this account is that suffering and celebration occurs in community. When Jesus is preparing to enter Jerusalem by arranging transportation, he does not prepare alone. He knows that he can depend upon his community to support him by going to retrieve the donkey and colt. As he makes his way to a road leading into what was both a festival of celebration and a face-off with empire, an action of both spiritual and political significance, he did not do so in solitude. He arrived with support; he arrived in community – with crowds cheering him on solidarity. People there knew who he was and named him to those that did not. “Who is this?”, some would ask. “It is Jesus of Nazareth,” others would answer. The joy and the adversity were not to be experienced in isolation but rather embraced in the gathering of beloved kinship.

As I prepared this part of the message about the communal aspect of joy, I could not help but consider the sobering irony of it all. This scene in Matthew is one in which the Jewish community rallies together to partake in rich tradition, to stand head-on with a government oppressing them, and to rejoice in a long-awaited Messiah. Community is central to the story. And yet, historically, the celebration of Holy Week and the texts that are recited and preached as a part of it, have been manipulated and abused by Christians to spew antisemitic rhetoric and even incite violence upon Jewish people, blaming Jewish folks for killing Jesus when that was doing of the Roman government. Jesus' Jewish community were those showing up to Passover and shouting his praises. So, as I look at this text from a communal angle, I have to stop and wonder, who do we consider our community? Who are those that we are willing to sit with in joy and in anguish, who are those that we are willing to fight for and stand up for in the face of oppression? It is all too easy to look at a text such as this and name our community as only those who believe, look, live in ways aligned with us. But friends can I remind us that we follow in the footsteps of a Christ whose arms spread open wide to embrace, to restore, stand with and stand for ALL. So, I would implore us, as we think about what this means for the present day, to stand in solidarity with all who are marginalized, all who are oppressed, all who are most vulnerable to the tactics of empire. Our Jewish siblings, our siblings of color, our queer and trans siblings, our siblings who live with disabilities, our neurodivergent siblings, our siblings without homes or sustainable income. May we be a people who show up in joy to dismantle the systems of suffering for our fellow created beings. And by doing so, may we model the ethics of Jesus.

What occurs to me as I get closer to concluding this morning, is that while perhaps it's clear at this point that joy is significant, it might also still seem that joy and suffering are in opposition to one another. That maybe they can or ought to both be named and embraced at the same time but that they are two separate entities that need to be forced together to serve a greater purpose. But laced throughout this passage is evidence that joy and adversity are not moving alongside one another or one on top of the other, but that they are completely enmeshed. One example of this is in the cry of the people – a refrain all too familiar – “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” That word Hosanna that people are shouting as Jesus enters Jerusalem means “save us” – it's a cry for help. But these crowds that are yelling for Jesus to save them also know who Jesus is. And so, this phrase, Hosanna, is all at once a roar of desperation and jubilation.

The road itself that Jesus walked was one that confronted Roman authority, but it was also a pathway woven with joy. In this, joy was not something Jesus brought to combat the fear of the confrontation. No, joy was the conduit for the confrontation. The road marked by fear, and intimidation and the road marked by jovial shouts and jubilee were one in the same.

Still, another image of this in the text is in the person and action of Jesus. We talked about his embrace of joy and suffering but, when we ponder the events of Holy Week, this entanglement of joy and sorrow is central to the story. People had reason to celebrate because their embodied salvation had come. But, we do not just celebrate the body of Christ, we also celebrate the blood. And so in the person of Jesus, in actions of Jesus, in our own understanding of redemption – a reason to celebrate – there is also suffering. And we do not parse them out because they are both wrapped up in person and work of Christ.

Friends, I would not want to suggest that we push suffering under the rug or lock it up in a closet or plug our ears and close our eyes while it begs to be seen and heard. What I do want to consider, wonder, suggest, invite...is that perhaps joy is not the antithesis of pain, but that instead they are two sides of the same coin. That in some way they not only work together but are inherently intertwined. That we don't have to choose one or the other for one does not exist without the other and we need both to live into and live out the love and justice of God.

Benediction

Beloved, as we go out from this place may we be reminded that:

Joy does not crowd out the pain – it is the container that holds it.

Joy does not silence the voice of lament – it is the teeth, tongue, and lips which make it possible for sorrow to be spoken.

Joy is not a band aid for deep and festering wounds – it is the balm which cleanses and soothes so that healing is possible.

Joy does not blind us from the dark places of our humanity – it illuminates it so that we may see clearly a path to crawl into those places and uncover what is hidden.

May we be a community that embodies restoration and redemption by boldly embracing adversity and joy. Amen.

Resources Used for Sermon

This Here Flesh by Cole Arthur Riley

First Nations Version | An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament

Entering the Passion Video Session – Amy-Jill Levine

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR9iN_jcmOs

<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/cover-cover/dismantling-anti-jewish-readings-passion-story>

The Queer Bible Commentary