

Sermon: April 9, 2017 – Matthew 21: 1-11 (Palm) and 26: 17-30 (Last Supper)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Last Sunday we introduced “remembrance as prayer” as our weekly prayer practice, and that has definitely spoken to me in preparing for our Palm Sunday worship. The power of remembering the past in such a way that it changes our intent toward the present and future has some very real connections as we prepare to enter Holy Week.

There is something particularly meaningful about sharing communion as we make the transition from the preparatory season of Lent to the heartbreaking days of holy week. I picture Jesus, and his inner circle, gathered in an upper room. What was in a chilling way “the Last Supper” for them as a group, has been carried forward by the Church as the “Lord’s Supper, the sacrament of communion, celebrated in the name and memory of Christ Jesus.

And the key words in that sacred meal, are “do this in remembrance of me.” As Christian worshippers we hear those words in a particular way, remembering that meal in an Upper Room as Jesus prepared himself for betrayal and death, and gave his followers a way to keep his memory alive. We hear him saying, “in future, remember me.” But the men and women gathered in that Upper room would have heard even more. The gospel of Matthew makes it very clear, that the events of Jesus’ last days took place at the time of Passover, and that the meal they shared bears all the marks of a Seder, the ceremonial meal of Passover.

The Passover meal is already filled with remembrance. As Rabbi Debbie Stiel reminds us, each element of the meal relates to a story of God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people, and the shape of the meal incorporates the need for the meal and its foundational story to be remembered from generation to generation. Each food of the Passover meal recalls something from their shared story: “parsley dipped into salt water serves as a reminder of the tears shed during Egyptian slavery; charoset, a mixture of apple, nuts, and spices ground together and mixed with wine are symbolic of the mortar used by Hebrew slaves to build Egyptian structures”; roasted egg, bitter herbs, lettuce and lamb shank also accompany the wine and unleavened bread. And within the course of the meal, questions are asked by the youngest child present, starting with this one: “how is this night different from all other nights?”

So when Jesus and his disciples gathered for Seder, they were already remembering what it meant to entrust their lives to the God who had delivered them once before from bondage, with hopes that their oppression by the Romans might someday lift. But Jesus added one more layer, inviting his followers to add his ministry with them, to their remembering God’s unfolding story in their midst. Of course they would remember the events of Passover, and now they were called to commit themselves to Christ’s sacrificial love, giving themselves for that a day will come when suffering ends and Shalom is known by all people. And until that day, those of us who accept the mantle of discipleship keep remembering and remembering and remembering, in such a way that our remembrances of Christ shape our approach to the present.

That first communion set the tone for what this sacred meal means to us. Once a month in the worship practice in this congregation, once a week or more frequently than that for our sisters and brothers of the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions, bread

broken and wine poured remind us of our calling, to be the body of Christ and go to those places where the bodies of the poor and the lifeblood of the marginalized are still expended for the benefit of those who run the game. Jesus' words of reconciling love, shared at this meal, call us back to the grace that has blessed our lives and call us forward to the walk of reconciliation between Canadian Churches and our indigenous sisters and brothers. Jesus' insistence on being at table with those ostracized by his culture, urge us to seek healing with the LGBTQ community and others who have been systematically demeaned by Christians. To share the bread and cup in a spirit of true remembrance, is to let its original edginess inspire our future steps as a community of faith.

Each year, one week before Easter, Christians engage in another remembrance: Palm Sunday, one of the more curious festivals because of the stark contrast it offers, between the power the world celebrates, and the true power that Christ embodies.

We don't know how big a following Jesus had in Jerusalem, but those who had heard of him heard the buzz that this might be the kind of Messiah they had yearned for, remembering the great Kings of old like David and Solomon. Yet *this* messiah was more concerned with righteousness than pizzazz. Tradition calls it the "triumphal entry" to Jerusalem, but what happened to Jesus within the week – execution on a cross – was the exact opposite of what any sensible observer would see as triumph. Jesus was heralded as King – but the kind of King who comes in not on a proud prancing stallion, but on a humble donkey, hobble-de-hoy, hobble-de-hoy. And when we mark this Sunday, with its familiar hymns and tangible symbols (palm branches), God calls us to examine our hopes and dreams: are we motivated by hopes of ease and comfort, or by the hope of a realm where all have full and equal opportunities? Are we content with peace and safety, or do we know that our peace is incomplete until all can sleep safely at night without fear of shelling, or abduction, or chemical attack, or having explosives detonated at worship? Do we divide the world into winners and losers, or do we celebrate the power of collaboration and inclusion? Each time we are surrounded by these Palm Branches, these memories of old, guide us to question our present and future.

And then three days ago, came another of those past-meets-present-meets-future moments. For several days now, Canadian news outlets have rightly been spending a lot of time marking the 100th anniversary of Vimy Ridge. Some commentators, including Governor-General David Johnston, regard Vimy Ridge as the coming-of-age of this new nation, Canada, as Canadian troops set a standard of courage, dependability and valour that to some degree still shapes our self-identification as a people. Others point out how controversial Vimy Ridge was at the time, and how it identified our splits as much as our unity.

And at the very moment that my TV screen was locked in to a documentary about Vimy Ridge, reports came in of US missiles launched in Syria and I was reminded of the interconnection between our remembrances of days gone by, and intentions toward our present and future as inhabitants of this planet. It was as if the mustard gas of World War I were intermingled with the chemical attack in Idlib province, and that intermingling left me saddened to the core. Now, as then, weapons have been deployed as the

option chosen from a bad set of options, and the gap between the promised realm of Shalom and the present reality of aggression and inhumanity comes into sharp view.

Every day – including this very morning, with bomb blasts in Egypt killing Coptic Christians as they engaged in their Palm Sunday services - there are tragic events unfolding in this world, and we are confronted with the brokenness of life. And in the midst of these moments, we remember that the one whose path we follow, Christ Jesus, promises that while the forces of violence and death are still flexing their muscles, they will not have the final word. In the midst of these moments, we receive bread and cup and hear their promise of reconciling grace. We live in the real world, we engage the hatred and the hopelessness and the brutality, and we express with our words and our choices and our very lives, that we must be all-in in our commitment to radically inclusive love, and intensely resilient hope.

We remember. We remember the arc of God's intention toward justice, a holy intention to deliver all who are enslaved, expressed in the Passover meal shared by Jesus and his devout friends. We remember the path of reconciliation and openness, set and sealed in bread broken and wine poured. We remember the irony of palm branches heralding power, but a power birthed not in aggression, but in love. We remember all who, past and present, have lived and died in battle-scarred lands, and pray for reconciliation, and peace, and life without fear. We gather in remembrance, and pray that the lessons of our remembrance will lead us to a brighter day. Amen.

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