

Contradictions

“Holy Week”

Matthew 21:1-11

April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

“Holy Week” by Ann Weems^t

Holy is the week ...

Holy, consecrated, belonging to God ...

We move from hosannas to horror

with the predictable ease

of those who know not what they do.

Our hosannas sung,

our palms waved,

let us go with passion into this week.

It is a time to curse fig trees that do not yield fruit.

It is a time to cleanse our temples of any blasphemy.

It is a time greet Jesus as the Lord’s Anointed One,

to lavishly break our alabaster

and pour perfume out for him

without counting the cost.

It is a time for preparation ...

The time to give thanks and break bread is upon us.

The time to give thanks and drink of the cup is imminent.

Eat, drink, remember:

On this night of nights, each one must ask,

as we dip our bread in the wine,

“Is it I?”

And on that darkest of days, each of us must stand
beneath the tree

and watch the dying

if we are to be there

when the stone is rolled away.

The only road to Easter morning

is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday.

Only then will the alleluias be sung;

only then will the dancing begin.

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethpage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “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.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The 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!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

We want to lose weight but that chocolate cake is calling our name. We want to be more active but the couch is really comfortable and there is a good movie on and there’s always tomorrow. We want to know how to do something but, well, it will take time, money and effort so maybe we really do not want to do it after all. We want to share the truth of our opinion but back off so as to not possibly upset a relationship. We want to reduce our carbon footprint but it’s cold and the gallon of milk will be heavy to carry and besides it’s quicker so we drive two minutes to the store.

Contradictions. We want one thing yet respond in a different way. So often what we say, what we do, contradicts our goals and our values. In Paul’s letter to the Romans he summed up our human paradoxes perfectly, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”ⁱⁱ

Sometimes our inconsistency, our waffling of on one hand but on the other, is small, personal and we find the way for a course correction. Yet our contradictions can be serious, dramatic, life-impacting, life-changing for ourselves and others.

We are horrified and devastated by yet another school shooting but we will not ban assault weapons. We will offer thoughts and prayers but not reform or background checks or prevention. We say ‘no more’ yet it happens again and again and again.

We see the strange weather changes, we know about the many problems of fossil fuels and plastics and the lack of recycling, yet instead of a sense of urgency and action we respond slowly, hesitantly. As Christians we all read the same Scripture yet read those words differently so cannot find common ground to care for creation as our Creator calls us to do.

A newborn abandoned in the woods, drug overdoses in tent cities, families sleeping in their cars at the Park & Ride, extensive lists for those seeking a shelter bed, are all familiar and recent news stories of homelessness in NH that worry and concern us, yet we—as individuals and government—do not demand enough affordable housing for fear of who it will bring into our neighborhoods.

Really, life is full of contradictions. Life is messy.ⁱⁱⁱ It is true in our lives and it was certainly true in Jesus’ life.

As we enter Holy Week with a palm parade as Jesus rides into Jerusalem, we enter a long series of contradictions that changed the world, that changed history, that turned death into life.

Holy is the week ...

Holy, consecrated, belonging to God ...

We move from hosannas to horror

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of those who know not what they do.

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to a cheering, adoring crowd. They wave palm branches as a sign of victory for this long awaited warrior king who has come to free them from Roman oppression and tyranny. Although he is surrounded by so many people, Jesus is absolutely alone in the knowledge of what this week will bring.

Contradicting the jubilant celebration, the welcome and praise by the crowd will soon become their absolute rage-fueled and loud cries for his death by crucifixion. The One who enters the city riding on a donkey, the traditional beast of kings and a symbol of peace, will soon suffer painfully and violently.

The disciples, his closest circle, certainly had been given outright declarations from Jesus himself that the Son of Man would be betrayed into the hands of sinners and killed, but they will not hear it. They will go from proudly marching by his side through the streets of Jerusalem to running away in gut-wrenching fear. Loyalty and devotion will instantly crumble into betrayal and denial.

Jesus comes into Jerusalem absolutely alone, hidden in plain sight.

Jesus will enter the temple, his Father's House, but he will discover a 'den of thieves' selling livestock^{iv}. The sacred space for worship and to experience God's presence reeks of manure. The sacrificial animals are banished from the temple by the One who is himself soon to be the sacrificial lamb.

The next day Jesus will struggle with his approaching death. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour."^v We can hear the contradiction in his soul—the divine certainty of what he has to do fighting with his very human fear.

On Thursday Jesus will gather the disciples to celebrate Passover, the feast that honors the Israelites escape from bondage and suffering. God's covenant on the first Passover promised freedom and a Kingdom on the other side of a sacrificed lamb and a dead firstborn. And at the same meal Jesus will make a new covenant promising that by the sacrificed body and blood of God's firstborn, God's people will be freed once again. But first they must accept, eat, and drink his body and blood.^{vi}

Jesus will be arrested and subjected to a trial that is about mockery and condemnation, not justice or truth.

The king who entered Jerusalem on Sunday will never wear a royal robe and golden crown, but he will be stripped and bear a crown of thorns.

The contradictory behavior and attitude of the crowd, the mob, and even his beloved disciples, confuses us. How can they not see who Jesus is? How can they go from love to hate, from adoration to crucifixion, in just days? How can those closest to Jesus betray, flee and deny, abandoning him at his darkest moments?

Our own contradictory behavior and actions confuses us. How can we be horrified, raging with anger, heartbroken with grief, yet again not find a way to prevent the pandemic of gun violence in our schools? How can we see the risks and dangers and mounting evidence of

climate change, yet distract ourselves with smaller, less daunting, less challenging, tasks and focus? How can we sleep in a warm, safe bed at night while others sleep on the streets?

The answer is that sometimes we want the light to shine on the truth, and sometimes we want the darkness. It is not a simple choice as we cannot always allow ourselves to see the reality right in front of us. Darkness lets us hide from what we do not want to see, do not know how to resolve. We turn away from the contradictions in our lives because we do not know what else to do.

The Messiah has come, but it is all wrong. He is not a redeeming warrior.

Jesus has healed many and even raised Lazarus from death. Surely he will not really suffer or die. God will not allow that to happen. But it does.

In our contradictions we hold hope and prayers that there will be those who have the ways, the means, the creativity, the legal power, to solve what we cannot,

On Friday, the worst day of Jesus' life will become for us Good Friday. The darkest day is when the Light of the World nailed our sins to a cross. Jesus will die and be buried for eternal rest, yet the most glorious contradiction of all will be his victory over death and the promise of eternal life. Amen.

ⁱ Weems, Ann, *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville KY, 1992, page 67

ⁱⁱ Romans 7:15

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Blake Nelson, American director and playwright

^{iv} Mark 11: 17

^v John 12:27

^{vi} <https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/36377-easter-explained-an-8-day-guide-to-celebrating/day/5>