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## *The Power of Vulnerability*

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*Luke 19:28-40; Isaiah 50:4-9a*

Few Sunday worship services stick in the mind of a child quite like Palm Sunday. It's a spectacular day at church: everybody waving palms and singing loud hosannas in the middle of all that glory, laud, and honor. I remember those leafy worship services from my childhood better than I do Easter, which always seemed a bit too dressed up and formal and straining to be impossibly perfect.

Who doesn't love the chaos of a good Palm Sunday morning!

I expect there's been a little of that today in Westminster homes scattered across the Twin Cities. I hope children – and even adults – joined the throng at the start of the service, marching around the house in a homemade, palmy parade. The handful of us here in Westminster Hall did our best to recreate the noisy joy that would have accompanied the opening of worship in our sanctuary – *if only we could have been there.*

*Palm Sunday in the time of covid-19.*

The pandemic casts a shadow across the parade today – which is exactly what happens long ago, when Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of hosanna the Pharisees try to stifle. The energy unleashed on the street that day will not be held back. The people come out to greet Jesus because they're eager for help. The Hebrew word they choose to shout – *hoshianna* – threatens those in power. It means *save us*, and they're using it to greet one they call a king.

The people that day in Jerusalem want something they aren't getting, they need something, and they hope *Jesus* – whose very name comes from the same root in Hebrew, *Yeshua* – will give it to them. The Pharisees are the religious rule-keepers of the time, and this crowd seems as if it wants to break some rules, turn over some stones to start something new. Jesus understands that, and says as much to the Pharisees: *if the crowd were silent the stones themselves will shout out.*

As the parade winds its way into Jerusalem, Jesus seems increasingly aware of what lies ahead. At one point he pauses – I imagine him stopping on the slope down the Mount of Olives, looks across the valley over to the city, and in the midst of that raucous welcome, he starts to weep.

He sees the shadow lying ahead.

Palm Sunday holds within it the wide spectrum of what the world gives: joy and sorrow, hope and despair, welcome and exclusion. From one extreme to the other.

The psalmist captures the impending anguish of Jesus quietly welling up as he enters the city:

“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me...therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; the One who vindicates me is near.” (Isaiah 50:6-70)

Palm Sunday reveals the contours of our faith, with its eager longing for good news, on the one hand, and its silent anticipation of sorrow, on the other. Perhaps even more than Easter, this year, Palm Sunday is *the* Holy Day for this time in which we find ourselves. One moment we live with hope for an easing of anxiety, the next we feel ourselves filling with dread. There’s a tug of war at work within each of us – and within the community: do we shut down and let ourselves be overwhelmed, or do we “set our face like flint” toward what we know will come, struggling to find the courage we will need to get through it together?

I’ve never served a church in the midst of a global pandemic, but I have served one in the throes of an *epidemic*. I was the pastor of Old First Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, in the decade of

the 1990s. Those were the worst years of the AIDS epidemic. Our church was situated in Polk Gulch, the oldest gay neighborhood in the City and early epicenter of the crisis.

My first full year of ministry in San Francisco was 1991. That year in the City, on average every week AIDS killed 30 men. More than 1500 a year. They were young: 80% of them in their 30s and 40s. The Bay Area Reporter, the local paper in the gay community, ran their obituaries. The centerfold each week had dozens of photos of young men and brief stories of lives cut short. (<http://obit.glbthistory.org/olo/index.jsp>)

It was relentless. Eventually 20,000 people died in San Francisco as the disease ran its course, but the deadliest time was the early 90s. Everyone lost someone they knew to the disease. That was certainly true for us at Old First. At one point I went through the church directory and did a quick count. Nearly ten percent of our members had HIV or full-blown AIDS. Most of them would die. My first funerals in the congregation were young men we lost to AIDS.

Especially in the early days, anxiety and apprehension stalked the streets of the City. The community was paralyzed with trepidation. A spirit of helpless fatalism hung in the air. Panic always lurked nearby, ready to creep into people's hearts.

It was not all that different from today in many respects.

Rumors and misinformation abounded. People were not sure of how the disease was transmitted. They didn't know whom to believe and what to trust. They were angry. Those with the disease or who people *thought* might have it were stigmatized. People were shunned and ostracized. Like today, the worst human impulses came to the surface.

Our congregation suddenly found itself facing the prospect of losing beloved church members. We had to decide how we would deal with death.

We will have to do that in the time of covid-19, as well.

A key lesson we learned in the epidemic 30 years ago was to speak of a person as *living* with AIDS, rather than *dying* of it. To speak of someone as *dying* robs them of the life they still have. It starts to make them a statistic, and ignores their humanity. Even when someone seemed near death we learned to think and speak of them as living. The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus referred to those too weak to sing any longer as "the fifth section." Their names appeared in the program at each concert.

Most of us would rather avoid the subject of death, as if it were not part of life. We would prefer to stay with the Sunday palms and avoid the Friday cross. But we learned in the midst of the AIDS epidemic that entering into the defenselessness of death caused by a disease that ravages the body and seems unstoppable, paradoxically gives us agency and helps tamp down the fear.

Call it the *power of vulnerability*. That's what Jesus shows us in Holy Week, starting with the shadows of Palm Sunday. He *sets his face like flint* and goes through those shadows to the cross, trusting in God's love in this life and the next, thus robbing death of its power. *The Lord God helps me...the One who vindicates me is near.*

This week we heard from national leaders about the potentially devastating scenario that could sweep the nation. The Surgeon General has called it "the Peral Harbor of our generation." We see it happening already in New York City, where 630 people died yesterday from covid-19, and the numbers keep growing. For our sake and others, we must adhere to the order to stay at home except for essential needs, and to keep distance from one another when we have to go out. It's our best chance at slowing the spread of the virus and letting hospitals and healthcare workers, researchers and medical science catch up.

But we should also prepare ourselves by reaffirming our theological convictions about death: we do not fear it. It does not have control over us. We trust in life beyond life. *The Lord God helps me...the One who vindicates me is near.* We will not let death have the last word.

The Holy Week narrative that begins today on the Sunday of Palms and Passion invites us into the vulnerability that comes with being human. Going with Jesus into this week is how we disarm death. We are not powerless when we follow Jesus through this week, right into the confusing mix of anxiety and

assurance, sorrow and hope – right into the night and, then, through the dawn.

In San Francisco our church offered to keep vigil with every one of the young men in our congregation living with AIDS as they came close to death. All but one had been cut off from their families of origin and had created new families of loved ones and friends. We were part of those families.

They welcomed companionship through their last days. Few of our congregation's members had been that close to death before, but they sat with those brave young men around the clock until the end, sometimes for a week or more. We learned *the power of shared vulnerability*.

Jesus doesn't merely die *for us* – a *sacrificial* atonement; he dies *with us* – and atonement of *solidarity*. Those who sat by the bedsides of those young men, waiting and watching, saw that oneness of Jesus with them, firsthand, as they came near death. It changed them.

Our experience with covid-19 will change us.

It already is. We've been keeping virtual vigil with one family whose loved one is seriously ill with covid-19. I have multiple technological contacts every day with the family, isolated in our homes. A small group of church members has started meeting and praying with the family using Zoom. Others are praying at

5:00 every day and sending selfies. The family knows they are not alone.

What mattered most in San Francisco during the AIDS epidemic was the *ministry of presence*. Not abandoning people. That will be the same as we face this pandemic together. Families desperately want to be with their loved ones, but cannot be with them. It's an utterly helpless place to be. They should not be alone, and neither should those on the front lines of response.

We can be present to them without actually being there. Make a call. Write a note. Send an email. Pray for and with them. Donate. Let's all do *something* to show solidarity with one another. Several Westminster members are making cloth masks. Others are volunteering to help safely feed neighbors. Some are advocating from home for people indirectly impacted by the pandemic – those who've lost jobs and have no safety net, who suffer disproportionately because of poverty or racism, whose circumstances hold them back.

The point is not to be more isolated from one another than we already are.

I was in a Zoom meeting of church members this week. We started by checking in – and it took about half of the meeting, which was exactly right. We were being church. A number of those who spoke did so through tears. That openness to personal distress was helpful to the rest of us, and brought us closer to one

another. We can be present to the needs of others. That's what causes Jesus to weep that day as he enters the city.

*The power of vulnerability.*

Hidden among the hosannas that day in Jerusalem is the reality of fear and anxiety. The public rally around Jesus belies the shadow of the cross falling across the palms on the road.

But that's not all that's happening in that scene. Holy Week is a lesson not in defeat, but, rather, in the hope that arises when we hold fast to our trust in life over death.

Jesus rides into that complex reality with courage and confidence in God, *in order to give us the strength to do so, as well.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.