

Palm Sunday – Year A, Matt. 26:14-27:6

Earlier this week, I found myself thinking about Holy Week and Easter in 2020. It happened to fall right around the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. That spring and the year that followed was obviously rough one for all of us. It was the final semester of my final year of school at Virginia Theological Seminary. Just prior to Easter, the seminary had made the difficult decision to cancel all in-person classes for the rest of the semester. We'd also learned that we were highly unlikely to have a graduation ceremony and that the dorms needed to be closed for the safety of both students and employees. We understood the choices and appreciated the impossible situation the seminary and the broader world was in, but were also devastated. Instead of ending our academic career with celebration and all the graduation rituals and rites of passage, our class would quietly depart to our new calls around the country and the world, heading off into a demanding job as brand-new clergy, ministering to and with people we didn't yet know in an anxious and scary time of global disease.

I think I'll always remember Holy Week and Easter of 2020. We had watched online services throughout the week, but my husband, Bartlee, and I couldn't bear the thought of observing that Easter stuck in our apartment. So we decided, with our best friends from seminary, to make the trek across campus, on that Easter morning, to watch the sunrise from the ruins of the chapel garden on campus.

The chapel garden at VTS is built in what's left of the original seminary chapel. Built in 1888, the chapel caught fire in 2010, and sadly completely burned. Rather than rebuild the chapel, the decision was made to leave it a ruin and create an outdoor worship space. That Easter morning, Bartlee and I, along with two of our very best friends, waited for the first rays of Easter

sun to break over the seminary, standing silently together considering all the uncertainty and fear we felt about the future, knowing we were leaving behind this place we had called home for three years, heading out into the priesthood in a scary and anxious time. Somehow, in the midst of that dark, dark season, the sun still rose. Easter morning still broke. And as we stood in the beautiful, peaceful ruins of the chapel garden, a place whose very existence spoke to the power of resurrection and new life in the midst of disaster, I felt God's presence so viscerally, so palpably. Nothing had changed – the future was still terrifying and sad, there were still so many heartbreaking days ahead of us. But the reminder that God was in the midst of it with us was one I desperately needed, one that, while not changing reality, certainly changed how I moved through it.

Now, six years on, we stand at the start of another Holy Week. Beginning on this Palm Sunday, we will be invited to walk with Jesus, in virtually real-time, through this, the last, darkest part of his life before his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Jesus will experience the full range of human emotions and experience in one short week, and the services of Holy Week will invite us to walk through those experiences with Jesus. On Maundy Thursday, we will remember Jesus' final act of love towards his disciples as he lovingly washes their feet and instructs them to live lives of loving servitude to others. We'll share in his final meal and celebrate the institution of the Eucharist, the gift of Jesus' real presence here with us at the altar every single week. We will watch with Jesus, as he prays, anxious and scared and alone, for God to take this terrible fate away from him. We will see Jesus betrayed and denied, yes, by his enemies, Rome and religious leaders threatened by his fame and the devotion of the crowds, but also, shockingly and heartbreakingly, by his own friends and disciples. Judas will betray him with a kiss, Peter with

repeated denials, and the other disciples, as they flee into hiding out of fear, leaving Jesus to face mockery, anger, and shame alone. We will see Jesus condemned to die, watch as he determinedly sets his feet and face toward the cross. We will hear Jesus' absolutely devastating final words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And, in the end, we will see Jesus' broken body laid in a tomb, gifted by Joseph of Arimathea, watched over by the two Marys, the brave women who have stayed with Jesus through all of it. The tomb will be sealed. Everyone will depart. And we will wait.

The gift of this terrible, crushing story is the reminder that, in this short week, Jesus has felt the full scope of the human story. In one week, Jesus experiences love, friendship, and joy, fear, anxiety, and betrayal, shame, humiliation, and mockery, pain, loss and death. We have a God who knows, deeply, what it means to be human, the full scale of all the varied things that can and do happen to us in this life. We have a God who doesn't disdain or ignore the human condition, but who chooses to get in the midst of this lovely, chaotic, heartbreak life with us. In doing so, Jesus blesses the very best of what we have and redeems the very worst.

Perhaps no other day in the Church calendar will allow us to feel the breadth of the human experience with God than Palm Sunday. In less than an hour, we go from joining our voices with the crowds of disciples welcoming a seemingly triumphant Jesus into Jerusalem, to lending our voices to the same crowd calling for the death of Jesus just a few days later. And, in the services of the next few days, we will remember and mark everything in between. At VTS, some six years ago, I was struck by the reality of God's presence, not only in that Easter sunrise, but in the darkness of Holy Week that had preceded it. God is with us and for us in all of it, not as a distant, unmoved divinity, but as a God who knows what it means to feel joy and hurt, love

and loss, friendship and betrayal. We have a God who isn't afraid die, not if it is the means through which that we, God's beloved creation, get to live fully and abundantly.