

March 28, 2021

John 12: 12-16

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“And Now We Remember”

Family photos play an important role in keeping us connected to our past. Recently, we celebrated the birthday of one of our sons and we dug out pictures of when he was young. It's good to remember, and it's probably been since his last birthday that we even thought about looking for photos of his early life. I describe this as a process of “digging out and looking for” pictures because we don't have what I would call an organized way of cataloging family photographs. Yes, we've got a collection of photo albums that have some pictures pasted and labeled, but mostly we've used the shoebox method over the years. Do you know about this method of record keeping? Pictures get tossed into a box with a big rubber band and stacked on the floor of a closet. This way of archiving the family history means we often say to one another, “We've got to organize those boxes of pictures, go through them, get the timeline in order, and make them accessible so we can enjoy them more often.” And by the way, the digital world hasn't made this any easier. Now, instead of a shoebox, our photos are tossed up into some virtual cloud somewhere, and we still say we need to organize all of that. Well, this is our hope and maybe it will happen...someday. Time can muddle the memories, and we forget what things were like back then, so much changes over the years, both in us and in our families. The old pictures remind us that life is a journey. We look back at the past and that helps us see where we are now, and I think it turns some of our attention to where we are going.

Today is Palm Sunday and it is a day that beautifully connects the past, the present, and the future. This is a day when the church pulls out images of Jesus and, much like the photographs of our lives, what we see reminds us of the journey we are on with him. It's most likely we haven't thought much about Jesus' entry into the Holy City since last Palm Sunday, and the memory of last year is different than any other. You'll remember that a year ago our worship had just gone all online. The Children's Palm Parade last year was virtual, with some of our kids and families in a video waving branches and celebrating the memory of the day the crowds threw down their cloaks to line the street, as Jesus rode into town. It's been a blessing to have some of our children in the sanctuary in-person today, and they help us call to mind, once more, the day Jesus entered Jerusalem and was hailed as the king who would save the people and usher in a new kingdom. Remembering this event in Jesus' life is like holding a family photo in your hands. Palm Sunday connects the picture of Jesus in the past to our present. What I mean is the palm branches, the songs of “Hosanna,” and the reading from John's gospel create an image that's about more than just a historical event. We stand today at the front edge of Holy Week. To remember Jesus' entry into the city is to also be reminded that we are preparing to walk with him through the events of his last days. This road leads to his crucifixion and it draws us closer and closer to the cross. As John tells the story, he wants us to see not just the picture of an adoring crowd and a victory parade, but to see all the other images of the coming days. The parade leads to the Passion of Christ. The shouts of “Hosanna” become the shout, “Crucify him!” and the hope that he is our king reveals how the greatest power is God's love for the world. Whatever image or picture of Jesus we hold today, we see the unconditional love of God offered through the one who took upon himself the sins of the world. Today is about more than a parade. After all, we are not called to stand on the sideline and watch him go by. We are called to follow him. We are called to remember that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God.

Part of the challenge to us at the start of Holy Week is the fact that we know the rest of the story. We worship today knowing Easter is almost here. We know the light will shine through the darkness of the tomb. We know that what appears to be an end is really just a new beginning. And so, it's hard for us to slow down this walk with Christ because we know where we are headed and the glad shouts of Palm Sunday easily become the joy of Easter morning. And this is the picture we want to see, and we're ready to celebrate eternal life and move beyond whatever threatens to lessen God's hope for our lives. But consider, again, the way John's gospel wants us to take hold of all the images throughout Holy Week and how the gospel invites us to walk with Jesus to the cross. Pointing to the data, as we say, consider that the Palm Sunday story we've read is in the 12th chapter of John. The Easter story we will soon read is in John's 20th chapter. For the eight chapters in-between, John reminds us of what the journey to the cross looks like. These are the pictures of those eight chapters: Jesus gathered with the disciples as he washes their feet and commands them to serve others in this same way; Jesus teaching powerful lessons, like when he gives us a new command to love one another as he has loved us (John 13: 34-35). Moving through those eight chapters, we hear Jesus predict how Peter will deny him three times. There are the strong words of Jesus, when he assures the disciples that even when he is gone from them physically the Holy Spirit will come so that where he is they may be also. On the way to the cross, Jesus teaches that he's the vine and we are the branches, and that just as he and God are one, so we are one with him. In these chapters of the gospel, the drama brings us into the headquarters of Pilate, where Jesus is questioned, challenged, and ultimately sentenced to death. The crowds are there again, but this time they demand that Jesus be held accountable. “Crucify him!” they cry. The images of Jesus throughout this week bring us to the foot of the cross. This is the picture we must hold. To look upon the one who

suffers and dies is to face those times in our lives. And, to face our darkness before the light shines, to admit that we are lost before we are found, to know that acknowledging our need for forgiveness makes the grace sweeter, is to discover God's presence with us. Palm Sunday deepens our journey with Jesus and it points us to the cross which will wrap us in an indescribable love that gives true life.

I share a couple of ways you can deepen your experience of Easter this year. One, is to read this week the Gospel of John from chapter 12 through chapter 19.. You can read a chapter or so each day, reflecting on the story, and allowing yourself to slow down so you can walk with our Lord. Secondly, you can participate in our special Holy Week worship services, either in-person or online, on Thursday and Friday. We're busy, I know. There are other things to do and see, but the images of Jesus we will lift up in our special services are so valuable in preparing us for the glory that is to come.

It's time to journey on now. Palm Sunday has brought us to where we need to be but we also know our eyes are set on where we're going. It's all about the cross. We hold that image because it has hold of us, and it is there we will find life. Amen.