

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

Virtual Worship

April 5, 2020

Hosanna!

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

Lent — the season of reflection and preparation — sure got derailed this year. At least our idea of lent did. Do you remember in late February in what now feels like another lifetime ago, we received ashes with humility and vulnerability while remembering the words, “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.”

And our Lenten journeys introduced us to some of the people whose very lives were derailed by encountering Jesus.

Remember Nicodemus? He was the faithful expert in Jewish law — knew the Torah inside and out. But he'd heard about the Messiah. His curiosity led him to a secret visit with Jesus one night. And my prayer was that you would stay with the things from your faith that leave you asking —as Nicodemus did — “How can this be?”

Through the woman at the well, I especially prayed you would remember that she who had nothing, had nobody, no hope, even had no name was the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus chose to share the living waters of God so that she could tell the world.

When Jesus restored the sight of the man born blind since birth, my prayer was that you remember we are called “believers” for a reason — it's because we believe that God also restores us in ways we could never have seen coming.

And when Lazarus was raised from the dead, I prayed you would trust God to hold us as we wend our way through these strange and difficult times. Times that have led us to experience new fears and losses, sorrow and despair.

But this morning? Here we are, hanging around the city gates with Jesus. With all the palms being waved and cries of adoration, Hosanna! Hosanna! There's so much excitement in the air!

But we're not feeling it.

Because while we started out
with every good intention of considering our own suffering,
with every good intention of praying with protestant prayer beads,
with every good intention of using Wendell Barry's booklet

things fell apart.

And they didn't go as we'd thought.

What did you think would happen through Lent?

In all likelihood, whatever you thought would be,
did not happen.

Because here we are — the final Sunday of Lent— with no doubt a lot of empty Wendell Barry booklets, misplaced prayer beads, and a level of suffering that we never saw coming. And not only is this a suffering that the entire planet is sharing, but the edges of it are blurry and there is a level of uncertainty that is unsettling. We're not even a month into physical distancing and reduced travel and we've already had enough.

But it's not just our suffering. Our relationship with the planet's been suffering too. With our global and relentless exploitation of other humans. With the excavation of her natural resources out of control.

With our endless cycles of production and consumerism that has lead to

obscene wealth, greed and corruption, war, global poverty, despair and pollution.

It is as though the planet decided to participate in Lent as well, as she confronts us with her own suffering as we stop. And we're standing on Holy ground, faced with new ways of doing and being.

The timing of our interconnected and global suffering is curious because here we are in the shadow of Holy Week. A time when we consider Jesus' own suffering for the sake of showing us another way, a way other than our own, a way that is in partnership with God.

We need the reminder of Jesus' story now more than ever because while we never saw this coming, he saw it all.

He knew God was near and beyond our ability to comprehend.

He knew all came from and returned to God.

He knew that human power and control was abusive.

And he knew exactly how it would all play out when he challenged his own religion and the empire.

He knew he'd be rejected,

he knew he'd be betrayed,

he knew he'd be denied,

he knew he would be tried, found guilty

and he especially knew he would die in the most horrific way

imaginable.

He also knew he was terrified.

Asking God to take the whole thing away.

But he knew he'd do it anyway because he had God.

And we will revisit his passion story across this week, seeing ourselves in the various characters and identifying with so many tough feelings.

But you know what else Jesus knew?

He knew that suffering was not the end of the story.

And that's why we need to remember Jesus, for our present suffering
and for all that we don't know.

For all the ways that we are separated from God.

For all of the ways that we are frightened and wondering how we'll get
through.

For broken systems filled with greed and corruption.

For the fear of death that lurks globally.

For knowing about lives that were also derailed and fearful, only finding
a life-giving newness they never saw coming.

For finding our own place in the unfolding story of God.

In all that we think we know and all that we don't know, know this:

You might come and go like Nicodemus, but God will stay constant.

You might find, like the woman at the well, you're coming up empty, but
God will fill you with something new.

And maybe you don't even know you are missing anything of your faith until, like the man born blind since birth, God restores you with something you never saw coming.

And then just when you think maybe you have God figured out — as perhaps even I suggest I do with my talk of God waiting and revealing and restoring

God raises Lazarus from the dead.

That's a mind-breaker.

It's going to be a hard week if we allow ourselves to be fully captivated and held by the story of the journey to the cross. It's going to be a hard few months because we are captivate to and held by our personal and shared suffering. In all the hardness, don't forget how it turned out.

And so for today, be present and remember.

Wave your palms and shout Hosanna! Not to diminish or deny, but to welcome the suffering *knowing* that it's not the last word.

Let us bravely, and in partnership with God, continue to reflect and prepare — let us reflect on the global suffering in which we all participate and let us prepare for a new way of being.

Hosanna! Wave your palms, Christ is with us.