

Mark 11:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47 or Mark 15:1-39, [40-47]

Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation,
that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts,
whereby you have given us life and immortality;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

— *The Collect for the Liturgy of the Palms, from The Book of Common Prayer*

Every year, on the second weekend in October, San Francisco celebrates Fleet Week. Tall ships sail under the Golden Gate Bridge, the bay fills with sailboats, and sailors, handsome and all too young in their uniforms, appear on the city streets. And the highlight of the week are two performances by the Navy's best pilots, the Blue Angels. October is always clear, and warm - the sun glinting on the waters of the Bay, and people come from all over the region to picnic or dine and watch the daring acrobatics of the planes. It is a marvellous spectacle.

Not everyone enjoys Fleet Week, though. If you live or work along the major streets that outline the city, you're right in the flight path of the planes as they rehearse their loops and dives. Time and again, the planes roar over the gilded dome of City Hall and the overcrowded apartments of the Tenderloin. They shadow the clanging streetcars up California Street, rattling window panes and silencing conversation. At the cathedral, where I worked, we didn't schedule weddings or events on that weekend, because the roaring would disrupt them. When the planes come that fierce and low, even their beauty can't hide that they were designed for war.

The city of Jerusalem was full, too, at that Festival of the Passover, crowded with devout pilgrims come in from all the surrounding countryside to worship, yes, and also to celebrate. The streets were full of merchants and vendors, dust and excitement and chaos. And the city was full of soldiers, too, Roman soldiers, an occupation force sent to keep watch on a restive people who gathered each year to celebrate a memory of freedom. Pilate, the governor of the region, charged with keeping the peace, would march his forces up from the coastal settlement of Caesarea, to reinforce the garrison at Jerusalem, making a deliberate show of the fierce and ruthless might of Rome. Imagine rank after rank of soldiers filing into the city, the sun flashing on their helmets and shields, the swords at their waists. It would have been an impressive sight.

The chief priests, and the elders and scribes, you see, had made a bargain. They had arranged with the Roman authorities to help keep the peace in Jerusalem. They did this so they could continue the ritual sacrifices in Temple, undisturbed, as they had been commanded by God. They sought to honor their tradition, to uphold their faith — to practice the grain offerings and burnt offerings, to keep the people of Israel right with God. But their desire to maintain the traditional order of things — and to secure their own place in that order — put them in a position where they welcomed Pilate and his forces into the city of Jerusalem. They attended that parade.

But that year, on the other side of the city, another procession unfolded -- this one peculiar and impulsive, humble and alarming. A popular country preacher, reported to work miracles, riding down from the Mount of Olives on an unbroken colt? And crowds of people throwing down their cloaks, and cut branches, on the road as he passed? And — strangest of all — these crowds crying out, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor, David!” Declaring another king. Dangerous words, confusing actions, and all in proximity of the influence of Jerusalem’s religious authorities, backed by the might of Rome.

Something rose in the hearts of those people, though, who turned out that day to shout “Hosanna” and lay their cloaks in the dust. Something stirred their belief, and their hope. Maybe they took Jesus’ action as a bit of political theater, poking fun at powers that be, stoking a spirit of defiance. Or perhaps they thought Jesus was a revolutionary, who might somehow inspire an uprising that could free them from Rome’s oppression. Or maybe they truly thought he was the Messiah, who could miraculously usher in the peaceful reign of God. Whatever they imagined, they were ready to place their hope and trust in Jesus to save them. They thrilled to chant “Hosanna”! They were ready for change to come. Surely, after this inspiring day, the world would be transformed.

Wouldn’t it?

And yet, what comes next is a great and bitter unravelling. Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple, shocking the religious authorities. Doubt that has been building in the heart of Judas, one of Jesus’s closest followers, drives him to approach the same religious authorities and offer to betray Jesus into their hands. Jesus is arrested, beaten, tried, and sentenced. And finally we come to a third, grim procession, this one following Jesus as he bears his cross through the streets of the city, on the way to his death. How many of the people who shouted “Hosanna” also stood in the narrow streets of Jerusalem as Jesus struggled past? How many turned aside, cowed by the soldiers? How many wept?

Yesterday, along with many hundreds of Episcopalians -- some from this congregation -- and many thousands of Americans from around the country, I joined the crowd that gathered on Pennsylvania Avenue for the March for Our Lives. I stood with my classmates and their children, and we talked to the people around us - some veterans of decades of marches, and some young people still in middle school, coming to protest the deaths of their classmates and family members. We compared signs, chanted and sang. The speakers were children, and teens, nearly all too young to vote. The speakers cried out their grief and their anger and their

desire to change the world, to make their schools and our streets safe places, so that #not one more friend, classmate, or sibling would die, shot by a gun.

And yet. And yet. After the speeches, and the chanting, and the excitement of the gathering, this crowd, too, faded away. We all turned home, back to the dailiness of errands and homework and bills and the need to put something on the table for dinner. The little tasks of life resumed their call on us, and we stepped away from the hope, and from the struggle.

Because bringing change into the situations we marched for yesterday will be a struggle. The path to change for anything we face - anger, violence, addiction, depression, grief, racism, poverty - is a slow and difficult path, littered with setbacks, marked by wrestling and compromise. This is the human condition, the unwieldy, difficult world that Jesus came to redeem and save.

But Jesus did come. Our epistle today, from Paul's letter of Philippians, gives us a glimpse of *how* Jesus came into the world to be Incarnate among us. Paul describes a great emptying, a pouring out, of all that was transcendent and divine in Christ, so that Jesus could come and be with us, so that he could submit to the suffering and struggle that come with being human.

I sometimes imagine Jesus, on the cusp of the Incarnation, as one of those divers who leap from cliffs over the sea - giving themselves up to gravity, and then the churning, dangerous chaos of the waves, hoping that they will surface and survive. And I imagine that the reason that Jesus leaps into those waters is to save us, to wrap his arms around us as we struggle, and bring us safely home.

It is a struggle. We cannot turn our eyes or our hearts from it. This is, after all, the Sunday of the Passion. Christ's Passion, yes, but also ours. This is the Sunday that we cry out in hope, "Hosanna!" This is the Sunday we face the temptation to betray. This is the Sunday we see Jesus standing silent before Pilate, and shout "Crucify him!", as disappointment rises in our hearts. This is the Sunday we bear witness to the violence of the state, and the violence in us,

too. This is a Sunday for feeling everything, and nothing -- a day at once too much - and not enough.

Whatever is arising in you today, wherever this rich and unwieldy and confusing story captures you, I invite you to rest in or to wrestle with it. Which parade calls your attention? Are you drawn to the orderly parade of earthly power, with its human frailties and compromise? Do you find yourself on the Mount of Olives, calling “Hosanna”, hoping for the world to be changed into something new? Or does your heart feel pulled to the sobering progress of Jesus making his way to cross?

Wherever your heart is drawn today, know that Christ is there with you. Know that God desired so deeply to be present to our human struggles that Jesus set aside all the glory and power of God to come and be present with us. Present in our desire for order and stability and safety, present in our hopefulness, in our desire to grow and change. And present, too, in our suffering and grief — present even to the point of accepting death.

Seek the presence of God with you this week, in whatever passionate struggle, hope or emptiness arise. Trust that God loves you, in that moment, whichever parade or procession or passion you are drawn to attend. And have faith that this moment of struggle, or grief - or even hope - is not the end.

Almighty and everliving God,
in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ
to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross,
giving us the example of his great humility:
Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering,
and also share in his resurrection;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*