

“Business as Usual”

**Palm Sunday Reflection from Pastor Ben
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Good morning, and welcome to the Palm Sunday video reflection from Bethlehem Lutheran Church in New Orleans Louisiana. We’re a 132 year old historically black congregation and we’ve made it our project during this virus to feed our neighbors and our neighborhood while so many people are losing or have lost their means of support. So if you’re looking for a meal, please come by at noon every Wednesday and Friday. This week, in fact, we got a great gift of \$1000 from St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church to support our Community Table togo meal, and I want to give them special thanks and recognition for their generosity. We also just found out that we received a matching grant of \$500 from ELCA World Hunger. As a part of that, we need to raise another \$500 on our own, so if you, like me, believe that this work of feeding is vital, please go to our facebook page or our website, at www.blcnoia.org, to give money that will directly support this meal. We’re ramping up our cooking and serving so that each Sunday and Wednesday we’re providing 150 togo meals, and this will only be possible and sustainable with your help.

Today is Palm Sunday, and perhaps more than any other Sunday under coronavirus it feels lonely and strange in the church. I’m missing the palms, the people, and the sense of joy and expectation that we experience on this Sunday each year. In fact, two years ago, I attended my first service at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. It was Palm Sunday, 2018. I came to Bethlehem to meet the congregation, the leadership team, and for the church to have the chance to listen to me preach as a part of the process of being called here. Like many churches, Bethlehem had a tradition of starting the Palm Sunday service outside, and then processing into the sanctuary while waving palms and singing. We were standing outside in the parking lot, when I learned just how different things could be in New Orleans. One minute I was just standing there waiting with a bulletin in my hand, and the next someone was shouting that we all needed to move over to the other side of the parking lot. I was confused at first, but then it was explained to me that the trees above us were full of poisonous caterpillars. I had never before dealt with poisonous attack caterpillars but I quickly decided that it would be a wise choice to avoid them at all costs!

This Palm Sunday is unlike any I’ve experienced before in my life. Like many things under Coronavirus, it is pretty much unprecedented that we are unable to gather for worship, for Palm Sunday, for Holy Week, and for Easter itself. I went and looked back at that first sermon I gave at Bethlehem and one thing really stood out to me. I don’t expect that anyone would remember this, after all I didn’t remember it, but the point of that sermon was that following Jesus means that our lives will never quite be business as usual. Hearing that message from the past really spoke to me this week because none of us are living lives that are business as usual right now, amen? We’re stuck in our houses, we’re taking classes online, we’re pretty much either working from home, a hospital, or left with no work at all. Some of us are already

grieving the deaths of friends, family members, and others who were important to us. School is out indefinitely, the whole hospitality and service industries have shut down in New Orleans, and graduations, celebrations, parties, and second lines have all been canceled. Nothing about life right now is business as usual.

Business as usual on Palm Sunday highlights the gospel reading, where we hear about the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. He comes in as a part of a procession, with people shouting Hosanna, laying down their clothes in the road, and a general air of celebration. Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, in many ways the dramatic culmination of the life and ministry of Jesus, and it is this drama that we usually reenact on this Sunday through our own processions, hymns, and celebrations. This is the story of Palm Sunday we hear every year.

This year is different though, isn't it. Both in our lives and in our church celebrations nothing is business as usual. Because of that I want to shift our focus this morning, from the business as usual story of Jesus entering Jerusalem, to the Psalm, which usually gets ignored but which I think has a lot to say about our current situation. This is from Psalm 31.

⁹Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble;
my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my throat and my belly.

¹⁰For my life is wasted with grief, and my years with sighing;
my strength fails me because of affliction, and my bones are consumed.

¹¹I am the scorn of all my enemies, a disgrace to my neighbors, a dismay to my acquaintances;

when they see me in the street they avoid me.

¹²Like the dead I am forgotten, out of mind;
I am as useless as a broken pot.

¹³For I have heard the whispering of the crowd; fear is all around;
they put their heads together against me; they plot to take my life.

¹⁴But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord.
I have said, "You are my God.

¹⁵My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love."

This Psalm is raw, in its pain and grief and desperation. "My strength fails because of affliction, and my bones are consumed." That's bleak right? It's a good reading for a time of unprecedented illness because it names a lot of the things we are struggling with right now. In addition to the physical illness sweeping our nation, we're dealing with a major economic crisis, in which our government is giving businesses millions of dollars of bailouts and individuals maybe \$1200, we're dealing with a mental health crisis in our country, in which it is more difficult to get treatment than ever before. We're isolating from one another, and I can say that in New Orleans at least, we're a city built on whatever the opposite of isolation is.

We want to hug, we want to second line, we want to share food, we want to crowd into small spaces and listen to music. We want to have massive parades and festivals. And so in this time of coronavirus, there is so much sorrow and pain and isolation and we need to ask ourselves what does it mean to live faithfully in a time when nothing is business as usual.

Actually though, that's not quite right. You see following Jesus has never relied on things being business as usual. Jesus doesn't need a roaring stock market, Jesus doesn't need record profits, Jesus doesn't need everything to be working out. On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem not as a king, but to die, and to do it in a way that would reveal God's love and care for all people. The early Christians were mocked, persecuted, and outlawed – Christianity wasn't built on triumph, but on struggle. This is what's crucial to remember when we're in the struggle.

Our worth doesn't, and never has come from our wealth – fact that a lot of people in this country have forgotten. Our worth also doesn't come from our work – another hard-to-remember fact in the midst of a society that identifies success with work. Our worth doesn't come from people knowing our name or academic achievement, even though the whole system of academic tends to reinforce that belief.

Instead of all of that stuff, and I've got another four letter word for that when I'm not being recorded and broadcast, our worth comes from this, that God has created us, loved us, and put us here to be community with others. You can do that anywhere, right? You can be community when things are good and when things are bad. You can be community at work and at home. You can be community with your job and without your job because in every situation you are loved.

In Isaiah chapter 43 it is written that God has called us by name, that each of us are precious in God's sight. That's simple, but it isn't easy, and it's especially hard to remember when things are going to pieces around us.

One of my friends this week, a pastor out west, had a beloved member die. And instead of going to keep vigil with that person and their spouse at the hospital, maybe bringing along food, and prayers, and a little bit of joy and love in the face of death, my friend had to do all of this through facetime, through the phone. Watching someone die through the phone is terrible, and yet, that was the thing that gave me the most hope out of anything I read, heard, or saw this week. The fact that she came up with a way to be present at that death when every circumstance worked against it is incredible. And it shows that even when everything in our life is disrupted, people are finding ways to be community and to show love to one another that are also unprecedented. That's the beauty and goodness our world is seeking on right there!

Remember the end of the Psalm?

¹⁵My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love."

Even throughout even drastic disaster of this Palm Sunday Psalm, an often ignored and forgotten Psalm that no one ever pays attention to because of all the pageantry of Palm Sunday, even through the suffering it describes, of scorn, disgrace, pain, isolation, affliction, and illness, the Psalm writer holds onto to the promise of God's steadfast, unending love.

And this love, the love the has no end, the love that follows us from birth to the grave, the love that created us, is disruptive. It is beautiful, it is strong, and it is never contingent on things being business as usual.

In fact, as you might expect, the only thing business as usual about God's love is that it is always there, and therefore always in business. This week our good news is that no matter our physical isolation, our health, our wealth, or anything else, God's love for us stays present and true, and that no matter our isolation or our situation we still have ways to be community and to create community and love for one another. Amen.