

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Matthew 21:1-11

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

Sunday, April 2, 2023

Shaky Ground

Well Church, here we are again. Year after year we stand on the edge of yet another Holy Week. We prepare ourselves to remember and move through the motions of Jesus' final week as he enters into Jerusalem, moving with intention and seeking understanding of what awaits him there. We know the story and we know what awaits him. We know the terrible road he must walk to the cross.

And yet, in the movement of this week, and the celebration and remembering we do on this Palm Sunday, we must know that Jesus is not a helpless victim nor a passive participant. He continues to know and forge his path as he goes with courage and clarity for what it is he is being called to do. Everyone else around him might not fully understand yet, but Jesus does. So as we begin to take a look again at this story, I want you to consider how you are moving through your own journey right now. I am asking this with no judgment but for you to think about it for yourself-are you being swept along by your circumstances? Are you just traveling on auto pilot? Have you ever walked through Holy Week with intention allowing yourself to go with Jesus? Are you seeking to walk with intention for your own life, even in the midst of forces that lie beyond your control?

Jesus is on the move. This is a week to ask, how do we meet God in motion?

I've lived in California for almost 15 years now, and although I pretend I'm cool about it, earthquakes still freak me out. Growing up in Utah, we actually had earthquake drills in school all the time. They kept talking about the "big one" that was coming and we talked a lot about earthquake preparedness. In the 22 years I lived there though, I never felt one. Within the first couple of weeks of moving to California, I felt my first earthquake. You all, it is NOT okay. The ground is not supposed to shake like that. The rumble it makes, that's supposed to be for thunderstorms, not the ground!

Those of you who lived in California during the 1989 earthquake are looking at me like "You don't even know, Irene!" I get alerts about earthquakes and there were 3 small ones yesterday in San Mateo, you all.

The fact is, if you live in California, you are familiar with earthquakes and you know it can happen: the solid ground can shift; the earth could literally crack; and the

whole world might change under your feet. I don't care what anyone else says. It is terrifying. The world could fall into turmoil with barely any warning.

“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil.”

Now I know I'm jumping to the end of the gospel reading for today, but somehow this reference to turmoil has helped me to frame in a new way what it means that Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week. In Matthew's gospel, when he's done describing the parade, he sums it up by saying all of Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil because of this man Jesus. And this is when I love that I had to learn Greek in seminary because the very word the gospel writer uses about the city in turmoil is referencing an earthquake. They were shaken up.

In Matthew's account this Greek word for earthquake is only used one other time. It is on that Good Friday at the moment when Jesus dies on the cross. It's one sentence in this one gospel that you may have never noticed before, but in the moment Jesus dies, there's an earthquake. Scripture tells us, “at that moment (when Jesus breathed his last) the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.”

And in his account of Palm Sunday, Matthew uses this exact same word to describe Jerusalem when Jesus enters through the gate. It's just translated differently. The whole city is in turmoil. The solid ground shifts, the earth cracks, the world is re-formed. They are on shaky ground. A colleague shared with me that what this tells us is that Palm Sunday is basically the foreshock to Good Friday. It is the split second warning, the first little rumble before what we thought was solid ground shakes and gives way.

The crowd that yells Hosanna Hosanna after Jesus rides into town on a donkey might not understand the breadth and depth of what Jesus is about just yet. They are looking for a literal savior to come and knock the Roman empire off their feet. We too, might not fully understand what it is that we are looking for and what it is we are seeking salvation from. The word Hosanna means SAVE US. Save us, O God, from all that is unsteady and shaking under our feet.

And you know, when we were first in the midst of sheltering in place and this Palm Sunday came around, I think we could all understand the breadth and depth of what it meant to shout Hosanna, save us! But even now, friends, we are living in a time of history when it really does feel like the world as we knew it shook and is still shaking. That steady ground, if we ever felt it, continues to feel unsteady. We've been through years of turmoil now with the ongoing pandemic, continuing racial injustice, wider polarization in politics, a growing wealth gap, and the list continues and could go on and on. If you were to reflect on your own life, I am sure many

things have changed and shaken too...maybe even since we last saw each other a week ago. Sure, we might have had a moment of false security when we thought we saw the end, and then something terrible like another school shooting takes place. When too many of our nation's leaders believe that the solution is building up more security through weapons or a resigned expression of "we can't stop people from doing what they're gonna do" and I send my child off to school, the ground feels like it's never going to stop shaking.

And so, how do we remain steady, faithful, courageous and continue to walk forward in the face of all that shakes around us? When we are walking on shaky ground?

We are invited to walk into Holy Week every year, my friends. And every year, I don't know about you, but I need to journey through it. I need to live into this story, year after year, to find myself following along with Jesus from this day right until the dawn of Easter morning. Because even as we hear this story year after year, we come to the story with the lives we have lived, and every year, there is some new insight that we have all gained, new questions, new concerns, new hopes, new ways the ground has moved under our feet, and new cries for salvation. We bring that to this story each time. It's Jesus' story and it's our story.

We live in complex times. We celebrate the triumphal entry recognizing Jesus as king just days before we remember his brutal unmerited death by a government who wanted to silence his revolutionary tactics of love and justice for all people, especially those who are marginalized in society. We will gather at this Table today and gather again around it on Thursday as we remember Jesus' final acts of love with his friends-breaking bread with them and washing their feet, even as he knows one will betray him that same night-knowing that all will run away in fear when all feels lost. We will celebrate Easter, God's victory over death and evil, and we do this every year even when death and evil are still all around us. The flowers will still bloom in Nashville despite the loss of innocent lives. We feed our bodies to keep us alive while we sit watching our loved ones die. We find moments of joy and laughter in our lives as we grieve all that is not right in the world.

This is the tension of the already not yet dynamic of the Christian faith. We move throughout each moment able to name our pain and the pains of the world and we still break bread with our community and hope for when all things are made new.

And so friends, maybe today we lean into Matthew's reminder that this week is an earthquake. And although it doesn't matter how many times we've experienced it, it can still be terrifying when the solid ground shifts, when the earth cracks and it reforms under our feet.

Leaning into this day as the foreshock and into this week as shaky ground, we know there will be moments when the ground shifts and shakes and Jesus looks up to heaven and says "It is finished." All will feel lost. We will stumble and we we might fall. But as with earthquakes, beyond the moment is the thing that the earth is trying to build. Beyond the moment of Jesus' death is the reality that God is building something new for the whole of creation. Because the thing about earthquakes is that they can re-form the earth under your feet, literally. Some fault lines can raise mountains, friends. In the moment when there is shaking, being near that fault line can be terrifying. But in the bigger picture of what God is doing, something beautiful is taking shape. As we shout Hosanna and wave our palms, we are invited to join the crowd into Jerusalem and enter the turmoil. It's an invitation to keep walking on shaky ground, but also to be transformed by the new thing that is taking place in the shaking.

And so today, Church, shout Hosanna and wave those palms. Join in with the crowd and follow Jesus with intention even on shaky ground. Hosanna! Hosanna! Save us! Save us, O God! Save us from hatred and fear! Save us from our belief that we cannot make a difference. Save us from gun violence! Save us from cancer! Save us from addiction! Save us from our perfectionism! Save us from ourselves, O God. Hosanna!

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, on the edge of another Holy Week, may we walk on shaky ground with Jesus, confident that God's intention is to save us, and to raise us up in ways that will make all things new. We believe. Help our unbelief.

Hosanna! Amen.