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Plymouth Congregational UCC

The Week of Palms and Passion
Mark 11:1-11

We had a bit of beautiful weather this week, and I sat in a coffee shop one of those days staring out the window beside me. My eyes reached to revel in the peaceful distance – a stretch of the Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural area soaked in the sun. Slowly my vision drifted closer, pulled by what grew only just beyond the pane of glass. My gaze was drawn to the smallest detail: a thorn.

A few bits of green interrupted the spreading brownish branches;
dry petal-less orbs of last year's blooms clung to the tip of each seemingly dead stem.
Not beautiful now, but so lovingly cared for was this mass of sticks trembling in the Colorado Spring breeze;
as-yet unseen buds seemed so cherished *despite* the probability of painful pricking ...
... or perhaps *because* the getting of them entails scratches and snags.
Loved because one must be care-full – of self and the plant –
in order to know the joy of its eventual expression: a rose.

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As I stared at the plant I thought, what an appropriate image for this contradictory day of celebration and preparation.

Palm Sunday: celebration of shouting children and waving branches, triumphal king come to the heart of the Jewish world to reign in peace.

Passion Sunday: Suffering Sunday: preparation for betrayals that are to come, last suppers and a criminal's execution.

Palm or Passion? How do we integrate today's entire message?

The thorns *are* part of the rose. Who are we to genetically modify the spreading branches of the Christian story to take away the prick of thorns? To celebrate with only palms, pushing aside the passion?

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If you grew up in a tradition celebrating this day, you may have heard the contrast scripture evokes between a king like Caesar, riding into Jerusalem in a chariot, and a king like Jesus, carried by a lowly colt; the ostentation of earthly power vs. the humility of heavenly authority. Jesus' title "king" was taken on to overturn the established concept of who or what was to be our focus in life, our provider and protection. Not Caesar, but God.

You also may have heard about the crowds, faithful Jews from around the world making pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem to remember the Passover, Israel's deliverance from captivity in Egypt. This was a festival of celebration and return to the center of their faith, even if it was the only time they'd ever visit the holy city. Anything could happen! Including word of a Messiah.

And you may have heard how, despite an encouraging palm-waving reception in the streets, the crowd and each of the disciples eventually turn their backs when it becomes clear that the government and religious status quo will prosecute and execute this man, Jesus.

King? Treason! *Of the Jews?* Blasphemy!

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In our worship this morning, are we these crowds and these disciples?

Shouting hosanna and waving our palms, desiring a kingdom to come and change our world for the better?

Cheerfully acknowledging the one who just might show us the way?

My hope is no, we are not.

Not the crowds because our gospel stories reveal the crowd as *just* learning about this Messiah-King. Just learning and distrusting, fearful of the powers that be.

Not the disciples either, not yet, because our stories reveal the disciples as *just* realizing the extent of the commitment they made in heeding Jesus' call: "come follow me". Just realizing that to betray, as Judas will, and to deny, as Peter will, show their remaining doubts and fear to claim Jesus' Way(capital W Way).

We are witnesses to the actions of crowd and disciple.

We carry the memory in our worship.

But we do not have to respond as they did.

Who are we honoring in our replication of these acts in our service? ***Why do we focus on the rose that hasn't yet bloomed into new life, when the thorns are right in front of us?***

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I share with you my own struggle in remembering the violence and shame of Holy Week, because perhaps some of you experience something similar.

Part of my mind tells me that in celebrating the fleeting hosannas on Sunday, the betrayal on Thursday, denial and crucifixion on Friday we aren't honoring the Way of the one we follow in faith;

by emphasizing *these* acts over Jesus' peaceful & compassionate response our tradition has sometimes encouraged a mindset of guilt and inescapable suffering!

In my understanding, Jesus didn't *want* his followers to fall away – it wasn't a part of the plan.

He understood when they did, for they were just learning the path he taught.

But his hope for them was that they *would* learn the Way he modeled and then model it for us also...

so that we might follow the way of the Palm Sunday crowds no longer,

so that we might learn from the disciples' growth...

and so that we might ride on a colt with the Christ,

following his Way of Shalom rather than focusing on others' actions,
the violence to come.

Maundy Thursday, Commandment Thursday, reminds us of the meal Jesus shared with his followers and his commandment to them: "Do this and remember me".

"Remember what I stand for, remember what I die for.

Remember that what I do, I do for YOU - For love of all who will come after you and hear the story of my choices.

I choose this sacrifice because in dying this way – for my beliefs and for this Way – you and others will remember my Way all the more".

You see, I'm one who struggles with the notion that Jesus HAD to be killed

– had to bring out the violence in earthly systems –

in order for his Way of truth and salvation –

his message of justice and compassion and peace –

to be followed and handed down generations.

But those same systems of power – be they secular government or religious rule – could not allow such a message to counter THEIR reign.

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So if Jesus' Way didn't necessitate the crowds or the intense suffering, *why do we celebrate Palm or Passion Sunday? Why mark Maundy Thursday and Good Friday?*

In his Palm Sunday sermon to St. Clement's Episcopal Church in New York City, Kurt Vonnegut (yes, satirical novelist, apparent nihilist and agnostic Kurt Vonnegut) preached a Palm Sunday sermon in which he argued, "Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears.

Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion,  
to the futility of thinking and striving anymore.  
I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward –  
and since I can start thinking and striving again that much sooner”.<sup>1</sup>

We also prefer to laugh, to shout the Hosannas of Palm Sunday, and leave the messy cleaning up of Holy Week out of it. But the point is: this is the story we were left with. It didn't happen that Jesus' message was passed to us without violence and pain and tears. So we must contend with the tears – not to despise our own crowd-like actions that have not yet grown Christ-like – but we engage this week in response to the frustration and exhaustion of our striving; our striving through inadequacies as we grow into Jesus' Way.

So that then, through our growth,  
we may continue the journey to Easter.

We have learned from the crowds waving their palms and then turning their backs.  
We have learned from the disciples who did the same thing,  
but who then turned back again to share the message of Jesus' continued reign,  
imparting the gospel and living the path.

We have learned from all those who came before us –  
those who made terrible mistakes and yet grew in the Way and the Truth and the Life –  
we learned how best to follow the Way of Christ ...  
and still others will learn from us.

We are on the Way.

About this week, Holy Week, the Rev. Peter J. Gomes reminds us,  
“*This* is the story that the faithful told to one another,  
*this* is the story that is at the heart of the gospel,  
and if you cannot take this story,  
then there is no good news for you.

You cannot choose; this *is* the story, and everything else comes from it....you cannot fast-forward to the end, for there is no end without this story”.<sup>2</sup>

This is where *my* struggle as a Christian leads me:  
It is this story of Palms and Passion, no other, that leads *us* to Easter morning.

It is the story of Jesus' *Way* –  
his teachings of peace and compassion and his ability to *follow* his teachings even to death –  
that help us to follow his example toward our own resurrection and new life.

And we begin the Way, this Holy Week journey, with palm in hand  
remembering that the thorn is one with the rose,  
and that its hope and beauty reside in its wholeness.

May it be so.

<sup>1</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* (Ramjac Corporation, A Dell Trade Paperback Book, 1981) pp. 327-8.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living: A New Collection of Sermons* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) p.251, italics mine.