

Good nippy morning from a cloudy hill in Rockport.....

So, here we are on the sixth Sunday in Lent.... Palm Sunday. The sun is hiding, the air is still March damp/chilly..... and I'm thinking about taking things for granted.

Next Sunday, at exactly this time (10 a.m.) some of us, perhaps many of us?, will be worshipping together in our sanctuary in Thomaston. The last time we gathered in person in our sanctuary was March 15, 2020. I know. I keep the bulletin from that day on the desktop screen of my laptop computer. So much we took for granted "back then"....

I prepared a paper bulletin for Frances to run off and have ready for us when we arrived at church, handed out by the greeter assigned for that day.

I had prepared hymns for us to sing, without masks, and sent them to Alice for her approval and suggestions.

The volunteers handling our coffee hour were downstairs that morning, getting the coffee and goodies ready to serve after the service, so people could gather, talk, eat and drink and enjoy one another's company and check up on the news around town.

The choir might have been gathering in the back of the sanctuary to march in with me as we began the service, Mimi leading the way. (I actually don't know if the choir was singing that particular Sunday.)

The offering takers were ready to come forward to receive our offering plates from me so they could pass them down the rows of pews to the willing contributors to the church funds.

Not on that particular Sunday, but on the first Sunday of each month, we would share in Holy Communion, with the communion team members passing "the bread" and then "the cup" down each row of pews for those desiring to share in this holy meal to carefully take a piece of bread from the plate and the tiny cup of juice from the circular holder of many little cups.

We sang! Three hymns. The Gloria.... all without masks and in full voice, as pew sitters became pew standers shoulder to shoulder, not concerned about standing too close to one another.

And finally, at the end of the service, as I stood at the back of the sanctuary, I greeted each one leaving, with a hand shake, a hug, a smile, a word of thanks for joining us....

All of these actions will be different next Sunday, or non-existent still, as we wait, with hope, for the power of the pandemic to lessen as the weeks and months go on.....

Yes, we took all of this for granted on March 15, 2020. As I've been preparing for next Sunday's service – it's Easter Sunday – I've thought about all these things we took for granted a year ago. I won't take them for granted now. Will you?

We will have paper bulletins, waiting to be picked up on the little table at the back of the sanctuary, without a greeter *handing* them to you, but *reminding* you to pick them up, and offering you a mask if you don't already have one on.

The bulletins will include an insert with the words to the three Easter hymns we will hum/sing together, so we don't have to use the hymnals in the pews. We will hum/sing behind our masks.

We will wait for at least another month before sharing in Holy Communion so we don't have to pull down our masks to receive “the bread” and “the cup.”

I will invite those present to leave one row at a time, starting at the back of the sanctuary, and heading out the front door or downstairs to head outside to chat rather than lingering in Leach Hall downstairs. There will be no coffee hour, probably for at least another month.

And so, we will adapt to this new situation we never knew we would have to experience. We will await the Sunday when we can be truly “back to normal” with no restrictions on our gathering. And I hold this hope – that we never take for granted again all the aspects of gathering for worship in our sanctuary that we have so missed over this past year.....

I know I've said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all.....

Blessings to each one on this sixth Sunday in Lent, the beginning of Holy Week..... Susan

p.s. I invite any who would like to join me, to gather in our sanctuary this coming Friday, April 2, at 5 p.m. for a Good Friday Service in which we will read the

Passion narrative from the Gospel of Mark. Dress warmly, the sanctuary will be chilly. Wear a mask.

p.s.s. I will download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and to the Federated Church of Thomaston's Facebook page....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, March 28, 2021
the sixth Sunday in Lent & Palm Sunday
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

People of God, we come together in sacred space,
not yet in the flesh but surely in spirit,
We come putting daily concerns aside for a few moments
as we recall stories of our faith.
We see conventions turned upside down,
as Jesus comes not seeking a crown,
but offering salvation.
Here we remember why we came and whose we are.
Let us worship God from afar in physical space
but up close and personal in sacred space.
Amen.

“seeking to live a spiritual life” *

After many years of seeking to live a spiritual life,
I still ask myself,
“Where am I as a person of faith?”
“How far have I advanced?”
“Do I love God more now than earlier in my life?”
“Have I matured in faith since I started on the spiritual path?”
Honestly, I don't know the answers to these questions.
There are just as many reasons for pessimism as for optimism.
Many of the real struggles of twenty or forty years ago
are still very much with me.
I am still searching for inner peace,
for creative relationships with others,
and for a deeper experience of God.
And I have no way of knowing if the small psychological

and spiritual changes during the past decades
have made me more or less a spiritual person....

* Adapted from the words of Henri Nouwen in the
Introduction to *Spiritual Formation, Following the Movements of the Spirit*

Reading of Scripture – Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he [Jesus] sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” **Then he entered Jerusalem** and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

“Then he entered Jerusalem....”

A sermon based on Mark 11:1-11

Pray with me. God who searches for us in all our wanderings, open our minds to the meaning of Jesus’ last journey into Jerusalem while he was alive. Open our hearts to our own paths that we might see before us the journeys you have planned for us this day. Amen.

I have to confess to you that Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus’ last pseudo triumphant trip into Jerusalem before his death, is not one of my favorite Sundays of the Christian year. We know how the story ends. We know the love fest and celebration that surrounds the ride Jesus takes on the back of a donkey into Jerusalem on Sunday ends in a tragic and horrific death for him five days later. We know the story – so why take the time to wave palm crosses today and wish one another a “good week” when we know that “Good Friday,” this coming Friday, is the most horrific memorial day of the Christian year?

I ask myself that question every year. This year, especially after the year we've had, with millions affected by the covid virus, and hundreds of thousands dying from it, leads me to another question – what would I do if I knew I had only five more days to live? What would you do – if you knew you had only five more days to live? If we were together, I'd ask for your responses.

I would get in touch with as many of the people I love as I could, and I would tell them I love them. I would eat lots of almond butter and Ghiradelli dark chocolate chips on vanilla ice cream. I would enjoy a glass, or two, of red wine every day. I would pray to God to tell my “Ma” I'll be along shortly so to watch out for me. I would sit on our deck and listen to the birds and wait. If I was too sick to do that, I would ask people I like to sign up to sit by my bed in shifts and hold my hand. If I was in pain or nauseous, I would tell Nance to “medicate me” to the max and just let me go....

The Gospels, all four of them, tell us Jesus didn't do anything of a personal nature in his last five days, except go off to pray alone. He “went public” even more so than he had up to that point in his life and short time in ministry – which was only one year, or three years at the most, depending on which Gospel you read.

Yes, he took time to be with his friends – to teach them how to wash one another's feet and how to sit at table together and eat and give thanks.

Yes, he continued to teach about the kingdom of God and what it means to be a God-fearing person, even though the people, and especially his closest associates, didn't seem to have a clue about the kind of kingdom he was proclaiming.

One commentator suggests a different understanding of the story of Jesus' last trip into Jerusalem than we usually hear. He writes, “The whole time [of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem], he is turning imperial notions of power and rule on their head. His theater is a humorous piece of political satire. In his ‘triumphal entry’ Jesus lampoons the ‘powers that be’ and their pretensions to glory and dominion. Riding on the colt, his feet possibly dragging on the ground, Jesus comes not as one who lords his authority over others, but as one who humbly rejects domination. He comes not with pomp and wealth, but as one identified with the poor. He comes not as a mighty warrior, but as one who is vulnerable and refuses to rely on violence. Jesus here takes the role of a jester, who enacts in a humorous, disorienting way a totally different understanding of ‘rule’ and invites people to see and live in the world in a new way. The event takes on the air of a carnival – think of a procession by a New Orleans jazz band – where those on the

bottom of society festively unmask and challenge the dominant social order. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is comical, dramatic, and political.... His entry allows us to explore the politically subversive nature of the gospel and Christian worship."^[1]

Why was Jesus willing to take this political risk of angering those who had the power and the will to have him killed? Why didn't Jesus just go get Mary Magdalene, marry her, have a couple of kids, go off into the desert and live a long and private life amongst the sheep and the goats? What do you think? Again, if we were together I'd ask for your responses to this question....

It seems to me, Jesus was CALLED, called as no one had ever been called before, to follow God's lead – even if that lead led him finally down a long and tortuous road to Jerusalem that led to political, religious and physical death. On the road that Sunday, the people shouted in honor of Jesus, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:9-10) And five days later, these same people would shout, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (Mark 15:13, 14)

Oh, we are a fickle lot, us humans. We say “yeh” one day and “ney” the next, depending on whether the winds of the day are blowing favorably for us and delivering us from evil or leading us into temptation. We can be a proud people one day and a finger-pointing people the next.

So what are we to do with this Palm Sunday passage? How are we to respond to it in these coming days of Holy Week? Some of us won't do anything with this Palm Sunday passage. Some will take out their palm crosses from last year, since we can't be together this morning to wave new palm crosses, and stick them on the bathroom mirror, or maybe the refrigerator, until they fall off and then put them back in a drawer for another year. Others will simply throw them away, mumbling something like, “Well, that's done for another year.”

But perhaps, just perhaps, a few of us will look at our palm crosses each day and think of Jesus.

Think of his last five days on earth as he approached his certain death.

Think of our last five days, if we knew we were in the midst of them.

Think of what it means to be a Christian – a person who relies on the belief that Jesus was born into the world to show up the pretentious political power of the well to do and demonstrate the holy power of God's concern for the poorest and the weakest among us.

Think of the possibility that this life is not the end of it all.

This life is not the end of the world.

This life is only one step on the staircase of everlasting life.

This life is all we have in this moment, but it is not the end of life.

The challenge for us, it seems to me, is to figure out how we are going to live *in this moment* if we say we are followers of Jesus.

I truly believe Jesus came into the world to teach us how to live with compassion and how to die with courage. He came to teach us how to live together peaceable and in good relation with one another. He came to teach us how to die into God, into life EVERlasting. I'll leave you with this question for the day: Are we listening to our teacher Jesus or are we so focused on ourselves we don't even know we're in holy school every day?

Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far.....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers,

from Blair a request for prayers for Lani, 42 with brain cancer and her mom, Judith....

deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice at home....

and prayers for Coretta and her family as they mourn the loss of Coretta's Aunt Ruth as she passed away unexpectedly in late February....

Carrie Connors and the Hedstrom family of Camden as they deal with the aftermath of a fire that took their home and 14 year old Theodore Hedstrom....

and a request from Mimi for Kendall, who is 49 and has hereditary neuropathy. It is progressing rapidly and at some point he will be in braces. Mike Sodano, who has had three-way bypass surgery this week, a friend of Mimi's and known to many in

Thomaston, “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine,

Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday.....

AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those
who make the way with us.
So be swift to love.
Make haste to be kind.
And may the creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all,
and the sustainer of us all
be with you now and forever.
Amen.*

(adapted from the words of Henri Frederic Amiel, 1821 – 1881,
Swiss moral philosopher, poet & critic)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

For Sunday, April 4, 2021 – Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

Words to ponder today about “Spring”.....

"Spring is nature's way of saying, 'Let's party!'" ~ Robin Williams

"Spring makes its own statement, so loud and clear that the gardener seems to be only one of the instruments, not the composer." ~ Geoffrey B. Charlesworth

"It's spring fever. That is what the name of it is. And when you've got it, you want -- oh, you don't know quite what it is you *do* want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so!" ~ Mark Twain

"I love spring anywhere, but if I could choose I would always greet it in a garden." ~ Ruth Stout

"No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn." ~ Hal Borland

"In the spring I have counted one hundred and thirty-six different kinds of weather inside of four and twenty hours." ~ Mark Twain

"Spring has returned. The Earth is like a child that knows poems." ~ Rainer Maria Rilke

"The first day of spring was once the time for taking the young virgins into the fields, there in dalliance to set an example in fertility for nature to follow. Now we just set the clocks an hour ahead and change the oil in the crankcase." ~ E. B. White

"You can't see Canada across Lake Erie, but you know it's there. It's the same with spring. You have to have faith, especially in Cleveland." ~ Paul Fleischman

"The seasons are what a symphony ought to be: four perfect movements in harmony with each other." ~ Arthur Rubenstein

[1] Charles L. Campbell, in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide* editors, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 157.