

Sermon for March 25, 2018: Palm/Passion Sunday

(This Sunday's message consists of a series of scripture readings from the week before the Crucifixion, interspersed with pastoral reflections [in bold text].)

(Based on Mark 11:1-11 and Mark 14:1-15:47)

Mark 14:1-15:47

14:1 It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him;

14:2 for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

14:3 While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

14:4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way?

14:5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her.

14:6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.

14:7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

14:8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

14:9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Why was the ointment wasted? Why, indeed. Why do we keep pouring out love in a time marked by so much hate? Why do artists keep creating beauty? Why do churches keep welcoming strangers and offering sanctuary? Why do transgendered soldiers keep serving their country? Why do children organize a march? And Jesus says, "they have done what they could. Why do you trouble them?" Jesus says, "I told you to tell this woman's story wherever the Good News is proclaimed, and you did not even write down her name." Can you honor these faithful followers, even—and especially—when they do not look or act or think like you? Will you remember what they have done? Will you remember their names?

14:27 And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

14:28 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

14:29 Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not."

14:30 Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

14:31 But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

I would rather die than deny you, Jesus. Look at me, just as good as any

of your other disciples! But I am so busy—and death is so common. Yesterday, a young person spoke of watching the adults around him become used to death. Since Columbine and Sandy Hook, when it became suddenly normal for children to be killed in our nation's streets and schools. And yes, we turned away. We stopped responding with outrage, until the great cavalry of death, the horsemen of the apocalypse, trotted casually through our streets like the great war parades of the ancient Roman army through Jerusalem—a display of brute force, of military might, destruction and intimidation.

And then a group of young children cried out, “Hosanna!” which means, “Save Us!” Can we see them? Can we see the branches they wave? And can we see Jesus, not on a warhorse, but on a donkey's colt, facing the armies of death head-on, riding in their midst?

14:53 They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.

14:54 Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

14:55 Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.

14:56 For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.

14:57 Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying,

14:58 "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'"

14:59 But even on this point their testimony did not agree.

14:60 Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?"

14:61 But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

14:62 Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'"

14:63 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses?"

14:64 You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death.

Why do we still need witnesses? Why, indeed? When those charged with authority twist the news, when they say it is compassionate to cut funding for after-school programs and meals on wheels, when they respond to the anguish of Puerto Rico by sending bags of skittles and throwing paper towels at the crowd, when they come for people in the middle of the night and deport hard-working parents, separating them from their children? The evil of the chief priests has nothing to do with Judaism. It is the distrust and manipulation of structures intended for justice. It is the false testimony, the condemning of innocents. “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.” This story should not happen more than once.

14:65 Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him,

"Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.
14:66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by.
14:67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth."
14:68 But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.
14:69 And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them."
14:70 But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean."
14:71 But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about."
14:72 At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

I am that weeping, bewildered disciple. I don't know about you, but I could write down such a long list of failures and denials. On sleepless nights, I repeat them to myself, until they are tattooed onto my heart. Left to my own devices, I find I can't do this alone.

Yesterday, David Strelnick stood in at the microphone and preached a powerful word. At the March For Our Lives, he celebrated the children who have risen up to call us back to discipleship, to hold us accountable for our commitment to life. And he celebrated, as well, a lifetime of hunting with—and learning from—people who carry guns. Sharing a stage with Sophie Wilson, who had read the names and biographies of murdered children, he spoke of one hunter in particular, who had taught him so much about this part of Maine—Sophie's grandfather, Steve Wilson. And he called on all of us to live into these two challenges: to live fully into our truth as empowered citizens, and to learn from people different from ourselves.

Yes. We need the woman with the alabaster jar, who shocks us with her public display. We need her because she already understands who Jesus is, and what's really going on. We need the servant-girl in the courtyard, who says, you're one of those people who follow Jesus. What are you doing about it? We need Sophie and the other young prophets, gathered around us, shouting, "Hosanna!" Save Us!

*--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor
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