

## **“Closing the Gap”**

Philippians 2:5-11

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### **Palm/Passion Sunday**

Palm Sunday is the day of the one who saves; I grew up thinking hosanna meant something like hurrah, but ‘hosanna’ means ‘save, rescue, savior’; as the crowd shouted hosannas while Jesus rode along, they were expressing their hopes for a better future. According to Tom Long, ‘hosanna’ then is also subversive, it is insubordinate and rebellious language; to cry out hosanna is to say that the way things are is a burden, wrong, unjust. It is a literal cry for help and thus Jesus participation in this parade is his political answer to that cry. Again, according to Long, “the palms are the politics” of Jesus.

Margaret Farley referred to this parade as ‘puzzling’ wondering why Jesus would even do such a thing. We are so accustomed to this day liturgically, I found her question surprising at first. Was this necessary to alert his enemies of his arrival? Did he need to put this final nail in his coffin, so to speak? Why garner more praise if only to fall harder and longer? Yet, Jesus acquiesced to the parade, he planned the transportation, yet he knows he will not become the military leader the people hope for nor stage an armed rebellion. It doesn’t seem characteristic for him to deceive anyone but he would never fit the definition of a messiah or king in his historical context. The people exalted him because that is what we do when we want something from a leader – his answer, though, was here is what I can do: humility. He came donkey and not in chariot; he does not have plans that would change the circumstances of those throwing their cloaks on the ground – what he offers to do and what he will do is to join them in their suffering. Within days, those who greeted him with their deep need for saving will hear of his scandalous death and have to decide if there was any meaning in his living or to shake the dust from their coats and go on looking for a more reliable messiah.

Triumphal entry may indeed be a misnomer for this day. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus demonstrated a religious authority that the people had not previously experienced, an authority that seemed to emanate from a closeness to God that they wanted to follow, or to feel. And so, he needed to express his public solidarity with the people because it is a part of who he is as well as a part of who God is, so he entered the city in a very public way, but riding on a donkey, an animal that would be used by a man of peace. Regardless of the appearances of earthly success, he wanted to be the arrival of change in the way of Peace.

The palm parade then is inextricably connected to his passion, is in solidarity with those who need ‘hosanna,’ is a subversive act and is grounded in humility and peace. That’s a lot of expectation – there’s a lot riding on the day – there were no doubt many more expectations as the sun set in Bethany.

On the other side of the equation, the Caesars had no need of a savior; possibly their only complaint in life was the constant rabble rousing, protests, and grumbling of the peasants. Those in positions of power and advantage within empire, including the temple establishment do not want the empire to change. In this way, we are in the gap between empire and temple/church; we profess to follow the humble way of Jesus and yet our lives are intertwined with the success of the empire in very significant ways. Everything that is to come in Holy Week will expose the holes in our ability to trust in God. Jesus goes on trial and exposes the gaps between force and peace, wealth and poverty, and power and vulnerability and personally the gap between our doubt and longing, and faith and questioning.

In all of this, I was reminded of a photo image from New York City; in 1987, an Italian artist installed a statue of a raging bull in front of the New York Stock Exchange after the market crash of that year. He intended it to

be a symbol of America's financial resilience. What I didn't know until I went in search of the year of installation was that he put the statue up at night and without permission of the city; it was due to public approval that it has remained in place by way of forgiveness rather than permission. But the image I had in mind is the change in meaning and perspective since the statue known as The Fearless Girl, was placed in the position of staring down the bull; she was placed with permission, but as a temporary exhibit, on the eve of International Women's Day in 2017. The Italian (artist) objected to the Girl, stating that it obstructs his artistic vision; but the Girl has been saved in place in the very same way the Bull was – by public opinion (she has been described as a 'transformative icon' and has become a "must see" for many when they visit the city).

Neither is really an image of vulnerability by name – one is raging the other fearless – but it's the juxtaposition of the two. As stated, the Fearless Girl was meant to be a temporary exhibit but, public opinion has kept her in place, she is beloved. As far as I can tell online, she is still there and there are plans to move her but no one has agreed to the right location might be and there is now speculation that if the girl is moved, the bull may go with her. There is something about the pairing because in spite of her name, she is vulnerable and we all know it. We can see it in the size and momentum of the bull – in the face of this small, bronze, girl-child, arms akimbo, I can ask, how do we find the courage to follow Jesus through this coming week?

Because really what I am asking is how we find the courage to follow Jesus through our own coming weeks, months and year – whatever it will bring. Will there be a school shooting this week? Another city with bombings? What will happen with the nuclear questions in North Korea or Iraq? Russia? What about bullying, cyber warfare, trade wars and the Doomsday Clock? Where will the storms hit? How can we endure more pictures of all out destruction of Syria, its citizens being pulled from the rubble, or scenes of refugees who have nothing but memories of terror? How can we continue to witness the stories of the Rohingya genocide or what do we do to protest and disapprove mightily the sex trafficking/human trafficking that is rampant around the world? How do we find or create the time, place, training, will, and humility to engage in the breaking down of institutional racism? How can the human family find more healing around trauma and interrupt the rape culture that exists on college campuses, and around the world?

What keeps you up at night? We must be in solidarity with each other about what wakes in the early morning hours.

It is precisely in following Jesus through this week that we see his integrity and gain his strength. It is in seeing his life come to this end that we can admit the incredible inhumanity that exists as a counter force to the love of God. We must take care of our hearts while doing it but do it we must; it will be beyond our comfort zone, with God's help it will be within our ability.

Another fearless girl comes to mind, Etty Hillesum, a Jew from the Netherlands who died in the Westerbork concentration camp in World War II. Her diary and letters from the camp were published in a book titled, *An Interrupted Life*. In one of Etty's letters from the camp she wrote, "If we were to save only our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough. What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but how we preserve them. I sometimes think that every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights. But if we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face, if we give them no shelter in our heads and hearts, do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning – then we are not a viable generation. It is not easy – and no doubt less easy for Jews than for anyone else – yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate post-war world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough" (*An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* p. 250).

The answer is to the palms will always be a passion, to be aware of the injustice – to listen for those who still cry 'hosanna,' save me! And to still to do the work required to let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. As difficult as it may be, we are called to lean into humility and invited to be vulnerable in solidarity with those in need. There have been communities in Christ throughout the world for over two millennia, and as

members and friends of the House of Hope congregation for more than one hundred years, this is a place people can and will come to cry out ‘hosanna – save us.’ We must be ready.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. ... Who though he was in the form of God, did not regard quality with God as something to be exploited. ... But emptied himself. ... And being in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross ...”

Again from Hillesum and from Paul: “I know that those who hate have good reason to do so. But why should we always have to choose the cheapest and easiest way? It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I also believe, childish perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter” (*An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*, p. 236).

What is in the mind of Christ is that faith, hope, and love abide and the greatest of these is a love that saves! Amen.