

TAKING RISKS

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

As our Psalm this morning states, “This is a day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). Palm Sunday is, in many ways, a very jubilant affair. We sing triumphal hymns; we wave palm branches and wear palm crosses; we celebrate with joy the fact that Jesus has come to save, and shout our hosannas; the One who comes in the name of the Lord is here among us. Amidst our Lenten days of reflection and repentance, of thinking through the ways we can bring ourselves closer to God, Palm Sunday arrives with fanfare and a sense of excitement. But even with this celebratory feeling, there is still this undercurrent of what’s to come. There is this subtext of suffering. There is great risk. There are contradictions that make Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem not a simple and straightforward affair, but something far more complex. Despite the build up of this day being something wonderful and hope-filled, it is also the start of a week where every movement and moment leads Jesus ever closer to the cross and death.

There are a number of contrasts in this story, and some of them may not be as well-known to all of us because they’re not expressly mentioned in the Scriptures, but the first people who heard this story certainly would have known. Jesus is riding into Jerusalem during the Passover festival. This means there are pilgrims from all over flocking to Jerusalem, preparing to celebrate the exodus of the Jewish people from slavery and oppression in Egypt. It was a festival celebrating freedom. And yet, on one end of Jerusalem Pontius Pilate is entering on his war horse, accompanied by soldiers and horses and armour and banners. It is a military procession expressing power. Though Passover focused on freedom, Pilate entered with a reminder that Rome was still ultimately in charge. Pilate represented Caesar and Caesar was Rome’s “son of God.” A “god” who clearly represented power, might, wealth, and authority.

In contrast, there is Jesus. Jesus who rides into Jerusalem not on an animal of war, but humbly on an animal used to assist with agricultural needs; an animal used to help grow crops and feed communities. Jesus comes and is celebrated by the crowd who call him the “Son of David” and “the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” He is the long-awaited Messiah; a king who doesn’t need horses and banners to announce his arrival, but a donkey and everyday people’s coats and branches hastily cut from nearby trees. It’s not how most might expect a king to arrive, or perhaps even how some expected the Messiah to arrive, but either way there is joy, excitement and celebration; a parade

created from a borrowed donkey and some creative thinking. A parade on one end of the city that emphasizes the contrast with Pilate on the other end: one proclaims the power of the Empire, one the kingdom of God.

We are also aware of the contrast and undercurrent of what's to come when we read about the crowd. They gather around Jesus and parade along with him. They shout "hosanna," which means "save us!" because they have identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David—it is a swirl of messianic expectations. The Messiah was to come and save them, and so they celebrate this. The expectations amongst the crowd would have been diverse, but some certainly expected that Jesus' saving ways would include overthrowing Rome's occupation forces and anyone in collaboration with Rome. They have high hopes for this Messiah, and by extension, their own futures. And yet, as Jesus takes various risks and expresses who he is and what exactly he represents in an honest and forthright way throughout the proceeding week, the crowd stops aligning themselves with Jesus. These same people will turn their shouts of "Hosanna, save us!" to shouts of "Crucify him!" Their joy-filled parade will turn to furrowed brows and deep-throated shouts. Open hands of welcome will turn to closed fists of anger.

These contrasts help us to see that along the way many risks were taken. The whole story, from the triumphal entry all the way to Jesus' death, is full of risks. Jesus risks arrest when he enters the city to public acclaim and brings attention to himself as someone who might challenge the political authorities. He risks his reputation and negative fallout from his righteous anger when he overturns the moneychangers' tables at the Temple. He risks facing challenges to his proclamations or being labelled as a heretic or a blasphemer when he teaches in the Temple. He risks misunderstanding at the last supper with his disciples when he speaks of his body and blood and remembering him, despite the fact that his disciples will not accept that he is indeed going to die.

And yes, we may wonder why it matters that Jesus took these risks—after all, he knew he was going to die, so why wouldn't he take some risks along the way? If the end result was always going to be death, then what are a few risks? Well, why do any of us take risks? Why expose ourselves to potential danger or harm or criticism or loss of dignity, respect, honour? In most cases, we do it because we believe that the risks we take, whether big or small, will make an impact in a particular way on the future: the future of our families, our colleagues, our country, our government, our climate, our environment... our world. We take risks because we believe the outcomes of those risks might make a difference; that even if we fail, the story of how we stood up and took a risk might create a stir, stimulate new thinking, bring people together, inspire a new

generation. What we're willing to risk is directly influenced by what we believe in. And Jesus believed in a lot of very controversial things; not for the sake of becoming well-known or powerful, but for the sake of love: a love that could overcome death. The risks Jesus took involved signs of peace and humility, standing up for justice, showing great faith. Risks that led to suffering and hardship, yes, but risks that also elevated the need to love and forgive.

Of course, it's not only Jesus who takes risks in this story. The disciples knew the risks involved in following someone who didn't fit into the traditional mold of a religious leader or political influencer. They knew when he healed the blind, the bleeding, and the sick that they were taking a risk. They knew when Jesus used his authority not for power and prestige, but to heal and forgive that they were taking a risk. They knew when their beloved teacher told them, not once but three times, that he would die that they were taking a risk, even if they couldn't accept it to be true. And for all those disciples, that risk had a limit: for Judas it was the allure of money in exchange for a betrayal. For Peter it was being found out as a known follower of a man whose brand of faith got him arrested and sentenced to death. For the rest of the disciples it was fear that caused them to desert Jesus and flee after his arrest, just as Jesus said they would. Following Jesus is risky business.

And what about the crowd that surrounded Jesus as he entered into Jerusalem? The crowd that recited psalms and waved branches and used their coats as a kind of red carpet by which to welcome and celebrate Jesus' arrival? That crowd knew what it wanted. Their hopes for the future were pinned on Jesus and their understanding of what it means to be saved—this is what they risked. In many ways, the crowd wanted what many of us want: political reform, better health care, clean water, safe streets, less discrimination. Like us, they wanted justice, compassion, peace, and vibrant, caring communities. But even the most organized leaders can't make all this happen their own.

In the psalms we read about kings who rely on God. In our Psalm today the psalmist speaks of God's steadfast love, God's salvation, of God's ability to take something rejected and turn it into the cornerstone of a new foundation of faith lived and built communally. Kings and leaders and even us—the everyday people—may individually turn to God for help, for protection, for salvation, but this is a call to *communal* faith. A leader may be presented with a list of what the community wants done, a list of the results they all claim to want to see enacted and built and redefined, but it's impossible for one person to make everything happen without the support of that community. The cornerstone remains just a cornerstone until the community of individuals integrates and becomes a community focused not just on individual desires for specific outcomes of

deliverance and salvation, but communal ones. Construction doesn't begin and end with just the cornerstone—it must continue to be built upon, and that building action cannot be done successfully by only one person, or even by many people who approach it with different sets of plans. Leaders and kings and all of us, we rely not just on God but on one another to carry out God's will.

So, how much are we willing to contribute, to take responsibility, to sacrifice, or to risk in order to achieve our goals of justice, love, peace, compassion? Maybe it helps to consider how we're doing this already. As a congregation we are building together and taking risks in order to extend love, justice, and reconciliation into the greater community. When we gather to learn about the history of Indigenous peoples on this land and the reverberations of the terrible treatment that extend out to today, we take a risk: we risk putting a greater burden on those who we want to learn from while they focus on survival; we risk putting all Indigenous peoples into the same box and making sweeping generalizations that may not be true for all; we risk making assumptions about how Indigenous peoples view reconciliation; we risk creating a false sense of goodness among ourselves for thinking that doing this kind of research and study and reflection makes us more noble or praiseworthy. But on the flip side, if we don't take any risks, what do we gain? What do our Indigenous siblings stand to gain? Where is the road to justice if we don't even try to move forward?

And how about the partnerships we have within our church with outside groups? When we choose to partner instead of simply be a passive space that groups can rent, we risk vulnerability, but we also open the door to the deepening of meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships.

When we chose to place Friendship Benches on our property in bright rainbow colours, we took a risk. We risked being a target for hate crimes, but we also clearly communicated to our neighbourhood that we strive to be inclusive, affirming, and loving, and that those things are worth expressing in a beautifully visible way.

We can take risks that show courage, express hope, and extend love. Or, we can respond to risky opportunities with blindness, weakness, and hardness of heart. We see it today, and we see it in the story of Holy Week: human responses to Jesus that move from jubilant praise to mockery, from words of faith to words of hostility. But one thing remains constant: God's will to show mercy and to save. Without jumping ahead to the end of the story just yet, we can affirm that even in the midst of human tragedy and great risk, God is at work for good.

Palm Sunday can inspire us to embrace something that reaches out and motivates us. As the historian Amy-Jill Levine writes in reference to Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem, "something long known but not yet experienced, something exciting, revelatory, is coming. And we are called into the procession of justice, of compassion, of peace, of a vision of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom as God wants it to be."

The whole entry into Jerusalem is one of great anticipation: what risks will be taken? What justice will be done? How will God's goodness and steadfast love be shown? Where or upon whom can we place our hope? And it all leads us toward the cross. The question is, where are we? Are we participating? Or are we sitting on the sidelines, afraid to take part? Are we willing to risk showing love with humility? Are we willing to risk breaking bread with those who have been excluded? Are we willing to risk hope in Christ and in God's kingdom come both this day and into the future? Today is a day of celebration and joy. It is also a day to question for ourselves what we stand for and believe in, to consider which parade we want to be part of.

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