

Sermon – The Way of Light
Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 11:1-11
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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 50:4-9a. We read one of the prophet Isaiah's suffering servant songs on this Sunday because as Christians, we understand Jesus of Nazareth to be our suffering servant. The confident servant is able to endure suffering because he knows God as Savior. Hear now what the spirit is saying on this Palm Sunday.

*The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.
Morning by morning God wakens—
wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.
⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insults and spitting.
⁷ The Lord GOD helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced;
therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸ the One who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.
⁹ It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? Amen.*

Our gospel reading for today is Mark 11:1-11. Mark's account of the entry into Jerusalem is a major turning point in the Gospel and introduces the events that led up to Jesus' death and resurrection. Hear now God's Holy word.

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ² 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. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this: 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

*"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

¹¹ Then Jesus 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “The Way of Light”

The text: Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. Isaiah 50:4b

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, waken us morning by morning with your gentle, guiding voice that we may walk with confidence and grace in the way of light. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Last Sunday afternoon during the Portrait of Peace presentation, many of us sat in our sanctuary listening to the elegant and talented Dr. Sharon Willis portray Rosa Parks and the beautiful tenor voice of Alfonzo Cooper, Jr. sing the music she wrote to celebrate the lives of civil rights leaders: The Rev. Dr. C.T. Vivian of Maccomb, IL, Congressman John Lewis, and the Rev. Joseph Lowrey. During that momentous performance in this abolitionist church, the due-west spring equinox evening sun streamed through our Transfiguration stained glass window as brightly as it ever has.

With our focus on light throughout this year’s Lenten journey, the illumination of our Transfigured Christ during last Sunday’s presentation was poignant. Today, we commemorate the entrance of Jesus of Nazareth across a bridge into Jerusalem which began peacefully; however, transitioned to Christ’s arrest, beating, and sentencing to death in the coming days.

The three civil rights leaders highlighted in the musical tribute last Sunday also partook in a crossing which began peacefully; however, ended in unprovoked violence. The cruel and hateful events that took place on that bridge in Selma, Alabama Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965, were brought into the living rooms of every American watching the news igniting a movement toward justice across our country. On the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which our youth mission team had the privilege to cross last summer, state troopers and county members violently attacked those who marched peacefully for voting rights, leaving many of them injured, bloodied — and some unconscious.

Two days later, Dr. Martin Luther King led roughly 2,500 people back to the Pettus Bridge before turning the marchers around — obeying a court order that prevented them from making the full march.

The third peaceful protest began on March 21, with protection from 1,000 military policemen and 2,000 Army troops. Thousands of people joined along the way of light from Selma to Montgomery, with roughly 25,000 people entering the capital on the final leg of the journey. On March 25, those who walked together in solidarity made it to the entrance of the Alabama State Capitol building, with a petition for Governor George Wallace. Westminster’s senior minister, #15, the Rev. Dr. James Barge, was among those who marched from Selma to Montgomery in solidarity against the cruelty, the hatred, and the bigotry within our country.

A few months later, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law on August 6, 1965. The redemptive Voting Rights Act was designed to eliminate legal barriers at the state and local level that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote under the 15th Amendment — after nearly a century of unconstitutional discrimination. How grateful we are for all who had the courage and grace to walk that way of light 59 years ago this month, for Westminster’s roots in abolitionism and

connection to this momentous event, and for those who continue to shine light on discrimination and injustice today.

This Holy Week, as we commemorate Jesus' peaceful entrance during that Passover two millennia ago, we are struck by the courage, the confidence, and the sense of self with which he rode into Jerusalem before the violence and redemption that was to follow. It is not smugness or self-assuredness, which often hints at arrogance or self-righteousness. No, Jesus of Nazareth had the inner peace of one who is wakened by God, morning by morning. Jesus of Nazareth had the inner peace of one who listens, of one who is willing to be taught, and as one who has God's covenant written upon the heart. Christ knew who he was, who God called him to be, and he walked in the way of light.

When we understand Jesus in the context of Isaiah's suffering servant song, the strength of his character is heightened. It is precisely because of his confidence in God's steadfast love and justice that Jesus can endure the hostility he encounters in this world.

Jesus, the suffering servant, absorbs the hostility and in its absorption, the hostility dissipates, like a great stone thrown into a silent pond! Christ's strength to absorb the hostility of the world on the cross radiates waves of light and healing from a loving and forgiving God. Jesus suffers, not because he has done something wrong. Jesus suffers because he does what is right, which rubs the powers that be the wrong way.

Each of us has had to absorb hostility in our lives, sometimes because of injustices we personally persevere and other times because we do what is right and advocate for those unjustly wronged. The best gift we can give our children is to empower them to become advocates for others and to risk absorbing the hostility of the world by doing what is right, following the People of the Way, and walking in the way of light.

If we want to be true to the gospel and the prophet Micah, it is essential we "seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly." If we want to be true to the way of light, it is essential we reach beyond ourselves and balance the scales of justice in our world.

The Rev. Dr. C.T. Vivian and Rosa Parks were true to the way of light. Their lives shone with a similar self-confidence and sense of self as Christ's did. Their lives reflected one who is wakened by God morning by morning, one who listens, one who is willing to be taught, and one who has God's covenant written upon the heart. They knew who they were and who God called them to be.

My friends, our faith extends a call to each of us, a call to have the same mind as Christ Jesus, the One whom we honor this Palm Sunday. In the way of this One, whose light shines through our Transfiguration window and who is our God and our Savior, may we walk with confidence, humility, and authenticity, embracing all humanity, advocating for one another, serving with gladness, and singing for joy. Amen.