

## **Giving up the title, King of Israel, for Prince of Peace**

A sermon delivered by The Rev. C. Bunny Oliver on April 2, 2023  
based on Matthew 21:1-11

Over the past few weeks the children have been learning about Lent and Holy Week. I introduced Holy Week by explaining that it lasts for eight days, beginning on Palm Sunday. Then comes Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday, Holy Wednesday, Maundy Thursday (or Holy Thursday), Good Friday (or Holy Friday, Holy Saturday and finally Easter!

I turned from the chalk board where I was writing these days in a nice neat row, to see one boy, Trekker, waving his arm in the air. "Why," he said in his inquisitive, youthful brilliance, "Why do you call this week holy?"

Out of the mouths of babes, right!?

What makes any moment in time feel or seem holy?

Recently I stumbled on a story about Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers fame. Most of you are probably aware that Mr Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. He's been missed my many since he died 20 years ago, but he's also remembered in varieties of ways, like this story:

It seems that when Fred Rogers was in seminary he made it a practice to visit different churches each Sunday in order to experience and learn from a variety of preachers.

One Sunday he was treated to what he described as 'the most poorly crafted sermon he had ever heard.' As the sermon concluded he turned to his friend who'd come with him that day he found her in tears."It was exactly what I needed to hear," she told Mr Rogers.

That's when Mr. Rogers says he realized "the space between someone doing the best they can and someone in need, is Holy Ground."

Those crowds of peasants and common folk parading with Jesus the first Palm Sunday must have felt they were experiencing something holy.

They were shouting "Hosanna," and "Blessed is this one who comes in God's name." They might have yelled "Save us from this life of oppression under the Romans! We know you are the Messiah."

They gathered branches to wave in honor and celebration, and to throw in his path along with their outer garments, all actions reserved for powerful rulers especially kings, in the ancient world.

It's hard to imagine and maybe impossible to recapture the breadth of their enthusiasm and energy in those moments.

I came to Oregon in 1992 and my first call as an ordained person in the United Church of Christ, a cutting edge, progressive denomination with lots of firsts; first to ordain women, then gay persons, and always pushing on the boundaries of social justice issues.

As we approached my first Holy Week in this new church, actually a United Methodist Church, I began to feel the excitement of anticipation.

You see my previous eight years had been spent at First Congregational church in Fresno. In that community there was a man named Bruce Morris. Each year, a few days before Palm Sunday, Bruce would go to the side of the church where a fan palm plant grew, large and healthy. He'd clip maybe 25-30 small fan palms-each maybe 3-4 feet long- for the children to process with. He'd wash them and clip off any stickers that might poke their tender, young hands.

Then Bruce would take his little pickup truck out to Rhoeding Park, because it was time for the annual trimming of the palm trees. Bruce would collect a dozen or more of these huge palm branches. When I say huge, I mean 12-14 feet! I actually never measured, but they were BIG!

Bruce would set up these giant palm branches in the sanctuary by shoving the thick, sturdy base of each cut branch into a flag pole stand. Once the palms were in their holders they reached high into the tall sanctuary, and then bending slightly to one side or the other at the very top, they'd each make a gentle but glorious arc.

When Palm Sunday arrived those amazing palms seemed to surround the congregation, lifting our eyes, hearts and spirits along with them and creating a magnificent space that never failed to somehow bring us closer to something called holy.

So, when my first Palm Sunday came in this new church in Oregon, you can imagine my sense of deflation when I discovered there were no palms at all. Not one; just small buckets of water that held very short pieces of wilting ferns. That's the year I learned that palms are not easy to find in the great Northwest!

The Palm-mobile went into service the following year. This was actually my small Mitsubishi Eclipse. I put some carrier bars on top and off I went on the Friday before Palm Sunday. It's a nine hour drive from Medford to Fresno.

Bruce met me at the church. He had all the palms ready. We spread out the sheets I'd brought and laid the palms in the center and then wrapped them up and secured the long package with large diaper pins before hoisting them onto the top of the car. We secured the package to the bars on top and tied the ends to the front and back bumpers. Magnificent!  
A sight to behold!

Palm Sunday that year was like no other that community had experienced. The heightened energy in worship was palpable. Something new, unexpected, and awesome was happening; and we were all part of that.

That's something like what I imagine you and I might have experienced if we'd been part of that first parade into Jerusalem the gospel writers all talk about. Living in the small village of Bethany or nearby, we knew who this Jesus was. He's been around a lot visiting his friends, teaching, healing, taking time to meet us. He was that kind of person, interested in ordinary folks, everyone really.

That's why he knew where a very young donkey would be tethered with its mother. The colt hadn't been ridden before and should have maybe bucked Jesus off, but it didn't.

He was doing something new!

We really hoped he was the liberator we'd been waiting for. We expected our messiah would come like a mighty warrior, sitting high on a stallion, ready with his army to vanquish the Roman occupiers and restore freedom and peace to our lives.

Jesus didn't ride into Jerusalem like Pilot always did before our high holy days, scaring and threatening everyone with his show of power and might.

Instead, Jesus chose to ride in like a king coming in peace, a Prince of Peace, riding on a small donkey.

Some of us were confused by that. We weren't sure. But then people started shouting hosannas and yelling blessings and waving branches; we all got swept up in the spirit of the moment, took a leap of faith and walked along too, all the way to Jerusalem, waving and shouting, hoping and praying that somehow, at the right moment he'd reveal his true identity, his true mission.

In the children's program we are exposing the children to many stories about Jesus so they can one day decide who they want Jesus to be in their lives. One way we do this is like what we do here in big worship, through songs.

Dr. Hawn of Perkins School of Theology has written about the song our children led earlier, 'Jesus Loves Me.'

This is what she says:

Of the many famous stories about this hymn, one of the most memorable came from the Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth.

Karl Barth delivered one of the closing lectures of his life at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of the lecture, the president of the seminary told the audience that Dr. Barth was not well and was very tired, and though he thought Dr. Barth would like to open for questions, he probably could not handle the strain.

Then he said, 'Therefore, I'll ask just one question on behalf of all of us.'

He turned to Barth and asked, 'Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?'

"This was a remarkable question to ask a man who had written tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put on paper. The students sat with pads and pencils ready. They wanted to jot down the premier insight of the greatest theologian of their time.

"Karl Barth closed his eyes and thought for a while. Then he smiled, opened his eyes, and said to the young seminarians,

"The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!"

There are many specific places in the world where spiritual seekers say they've experienced something they'd call holy ground, a kind of glimpse of the divine or eternal; thin places.

The poets remind us to stay awake and pay attention, because every day, every ordinary moment has that potential. When or where such moments open for us, are ours to discover.

I'm grateful for mystical poets like Kabir, who wrote in India more than 500 years ago. Maybe you've heard this one, and I'll let the poet have the final word. A Great Pilgrimage, by Kabir:

I felt in need of a great pilgrimage  
so I sat still for three  
days

and God came  
to me.

Amen.