

Palm Sunday
April 10, 2022; Year C
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

On a day like today, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture. There are so many competing images. And there are so... many... words. What more is there to say? Today, we have heard the Word that breaks open our hearts. We have followed the story of Jesus. And it seems like we have been following for months. At Christmas we heard again the mystery of the baby born in Bethlehem, of God with of us, of the light that the darkness could not overcome. In Epiphany we considered the examples of the light. And in Lent, we considered the darkness. We heard again the stories of Jesus teaching and healing the people—of Jesus literally shining in lives marked by pain and poverty. And it must seem to us, after hearing again of the suffering of Jesus, of his death on the Cross, that the darkness has won.

This is our Holy Week. That is, this day begins a week set apart from all the other weeks. And, I have to add that *this* Holy Week is different than any I can remember. Because for the last two years, we have taken a pause in all of the commemorating. Our liturgies had to be bent this way and that way to fit COVID protocols. We have had to rethink how we work together to worship God.

That is what liturgy is: the work of God's people to worship God, and honor God, and also, to lead us to new life in Christ. So, as much as I am delighted that we are taking up again the palm processions and the foot-washing and the lighting of the new fire—as exciting and joyful as it is to take up again these solemn liturgies—I worry.

There is a danger to us in all of this beautiful, heart-breaking remembering. The danger is that we would think that we are simply re-enacting history. The danger is that we would think that Jesus' life and death was only an historic event—worse yet, that it was a pretty and clean event, where everyone wore and acted their Sunday best. This is dangerous to our spirits. Because if we go home today satisfied by our remembering, then how will we change the world in Jesus' name?

It is so hard in the midst of all of this Holy Week remembering to see the big picture. And so, we take the time for just a few more words, in order to shake off the dust of history and take a look at the world that we live in, two millennia after the first Holy Week.

There is the natural beauty and violence of the created world. This week, the Interfaith Center at Westfield State held its annual breakfast, celebrating the spiritual lives of all the students and faculty. It was a joy to be in the same room after two years of waiting! Afterward, the chaplains met for our monthly business session, and we were challenged by one of our members. None of this joy is going to mean a thing, she reminded us, unless we take action on reducing our waste of natural resources right now. And you know, I believe her. There is no disputing the fact that the extreme weather that used to come every century or so is now coming every year or so. What must we do about a world where a hundred years' storm happens every year or when wildfires destroy hundreds of square miles of living space every season?

I am joyful this week about more than the chance to see students and faculty face to face. I am delighted that today the Supreme Court of the United States looks that much more like the citizens of the United States. I have no idea whether 10 years from now I will

think that Ketanji Brown Jackson is making wise decisions or stupid ones, but I am thrilled that the very fact of her confirmation as a justice is making thousands of little girls think that they could grow up to serve our nation.

There is a violent culture of our country that has perverted the quite reasonable notion that citizens of a country be allowed to defend themselves to the idea that every man, woman, and child has the inalienable right to carry a military-style assault weapon with a thirty-round clip—and that talking about how to make our every-day life safer means that we are trampling on the rights of others.

Global climate change and systemic racism and gun-control legislation are just three facts of life that get *me* worked up. Any one of you could add to the list of darkness. The point is that we still live in a world where the darkness threatens to overcome the light.

And so we ask, if, two thousand years later, we still live in a world where the darkness is so dark, why do we celebrate such a solemn remembrance year after year? What did Jesus' life and death do if there is still darkness to be overcome?

On a day like today, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture. There are so many details! This is the time of year where every parish priest has lists of her lists and every parish secretary is wondering if she should sprinkle holy water on the copy machine. A friend of mine who works at a large cathedral posted the other day that Palm Sunday is like New Years' Eve for the owners of donkeys—they have too many invitations to accept! We stand in the middle of the picture, and so it is hard to see it all.

But perhaps that is it. We are standing in the middle of the picture. In our ritual for today, this is the midpoint. We have had the historic re-enactment—a little more thoroughly than most Sundays, but like every Sunday, we have heard the Word of God, offered first thousands of years ago, and every Sunday down through the centuries, and finally today, to us. And now we look forward to the Meal, which Sunday after Sunday brings us the nourishment—the presence of God in real food, the bread and the wine—nourishment to take us out into the world and fill us with the love and energy we need to outshine the darkness.

Ritually, we are standing between the history of the Word and the hope of the Meal. That is what we do in our ritual. That is our reality. We stand in the middle. God created a world, vast and beautiful, and thoroughly unappreciated until God created us. And we love the world. And we use it and abuse it. And it pleases God that we stand in the middle of it.

We please God just by being here, just by standing in the middle of God's vast and mysterious creation. We please God so much, that God gives us the imagination and the will to do what we desire to do. And although our hearts are restless until they return again to God, our imaginations and wills can lead us to good and evil. And it pleases God that we work hard to understand the difference and to choose the good.

We get to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, God and Satan. And if you quibble with that description of free will—well, you get to choose how *you* define the struggle. And it seems that our struggle to change the world into God's vision of goodness pleases God. Our struggle pleases God.

Finally then, our heart-breaking story makes some sense. God did not become one of us in order to pay a ransom for the misbehavior caused by our restless imaginations and wills. And God did not become one of us to make the world perpetually bright and shiny and perfect. God made us because God loves us—and God became one of us because God *likes* us. Jesus got close to us. Jesus lived with us; was affected by us and our actions. Jesus

played with us when we were children and rejoiced when we were married and wept when we died. And finally, Jesus himself died and rose again. God became one of us to show us that there is more to life than just what we can see as we stand in the middle of the picture.

We do not see the picture beyond this world. That is, we do not see the *big* picture. But the promise of Jesus is that there is reality beyond our vision. For today, we stand in the middle. God's presence is all around us—in the history of our holy Word and in the nourishment of our holy Meal. But more, on this day, we get to take our hope out in to the world and to love the people of God.