

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-17; Romans 12:14-21

Message: Ripples of Renewal

April 5, 2020; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Palm Sunday

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To say that our plans have changed in the last couple of weeks would be an understatement. On the first Sunday of Lent, the first Sunday of March, we had no idea that we would not be gathered in our church building for worship on Palm Sunday. When the worship planners chose the theme “Ripples of Grace,” we had no idea how the ripples would be spreading in our community. And I don’t mean spreading sickness, like a virus. I mean ripples of resting, serving, giving, loving are spreading in ways that we never imagined.

Now we come to the Sunday in the season of Lent that we call Palm Sunday. It’s the day when we read the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds of people shout “Hosanna” while waving palm branches. We’ve celebrated Palm Sunday so many times that we might know what to expect. A couple of months ago, when I was preparing the sermon themes for the season of Lent, including this service, I kinda had in my mind where I thought I would be going with this story. I chose the theme “Ripples of Renewal.”

And then the coronavirus, COVID-19, changed all of our normal ways of doing things. Would that theme still work? How would the last verses of Romans 12 connect with the Palm Sunday story?

But then I realized that the Palm Sunday story is also a story of things not turning out as expected. Palm Sunday brought “ripples of renewal” that turned a lot of things upside down.

Let me explain. Jesus came into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of the celebration of the Passover. The feast of Passover was a celebration of God’s deliverance of his people from Egypt. It was a time to remember and celebrate their identity in becoming a nation. It was a time to hope for that deliverance to happen again, to be free from the control of the Roman authorities. And so the air at the time of Passover is charged with hope of the Messiah, the deliverer of God’s people.

Along comes Jesus, entering Jerusalem, presenting himself as the Messiah. To do that Jesus deliberately set up the parade. No, he did not stage it by informing people of what would happen and telling them to respond in a certain way like some politicians do. After all, it looks a lot better on the news if there is a crowd present, so let’s set it up for the cameras. There was no false or staged enthusiasm when Jesus came into Jerusalem. Jesus inspired the people by entering the city in a way that recalled for them the words of the prophets. Jesus came riding on a young donkey.

Jesus was making two statements here. He was confirming himself as the fulfillment of

prophecy, revealing himself as the promised and expected Messiah/King. He was the deliverer of the people, the Son of David who would rule on David's throne forever. He was the one who came in the name of the Lord. He was the one sent from God, the one whom the people must look for. Woohoo!! He's here!!

But there was a second statement that Jesus was making, equally important. This is the unexpected part: Jesus enters as a gentle, humble King. He did not come on a powerful war-horse, with an army of followers. He was King, but his kingdom was not a political kingdom of this world. It was not a kingdom of power and might in a military sense. The kingdom of God, the active rule of God in the world which Jesus came to bring was a kingdom of peace. This is a true peace, a peace not of this world, a peace between God and sinners, that would bring peace between people and peace with creation. It was a kingdom that would restore things to the way they were meant to be. As Messiah, Jesus was the Prince of Peace.

Jesus did not come to defeat enemies, but to forgive them. He did not come to grab power and authority. He came to serve. He challenges the economics and traditions in the temple in order to restore the temple to a place of prayer and worship. He came to bring the hope of healing. He raises the importance and value of children by affirming their praises.

And then he walked away. "He left them and went out of the city to Bethany." (Matthew 21:17)

Jesus didn't ride the wave of popularity that was stirred by his parade into the city. He didn't continue to make or prove his point about priorities of prayer and praise. He went to stay with his friends for the evening.

Jesus did not come for public popularity. He came to bring renewal. It's not about power and prestige. It's not about making sure people get what they deserve, nor about getting revenge. It's not about hatred and holding a grudge.

Jesus came to bring a way of life that says a kind word back to those who are angry with us and oppose us. Jesus came to bring a way of life that shows humility, where people don't focus on popularity and status. Jesus came to bring a way of life that expresses forgiveness and means it, where grudges are let go.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem, on a donkey, to bring a renewal of what it means to live as the people of God. It's not about political power. It's about living a life of love for God and for our neighbour.

I wonder if this is something we are learning, in all that is going on around us right now. Aside from the reports of sickness and fear and anxiety, there are many expressions of care and concern being shown to one another. The theme "Community Strong" is being posted everywhere. We're reminded regularly that "we're all in this together." May that be more than a slogan.

It's wonderful to see people caring for each other without first asking what church they are part of, neighbours talking to each other without concern about nationality, people seeing each other out on the street and talking without first considering their level of income. We are getting to the root of relationships: acceptance, care, love for one another.

I came across an interesting quote from Kenny Wollman, a member of the Baker Hutterite Colony in Manitoba. In a CBC interview he said, "After this is all over, will we simply return to our celebrity-worshipping, individualistic ways? Or will this cause us to deeply reflect on how we live life and to zoom in on what really matters—and that is human relationships and the well-being of all in the human family?"

It might be that a virus brings this renewal. It's living out what Jesus came to bring and make possible through his life, death and resurrection. He came to bring a renewal in relationships and restore priorities in worship of God.

At the end of that week, after he entered Jerusalem, Jesus would give the ultimate example of what that looks like. He would take on himself the sin of the world and suffer the judgment of God on that sin. He would speak from the cross, "Father, forgive them." In the sacrifice of his death, he would overcome evil with good.

Three days later he would rise from the dead, victorious over sin and death and its power. Next week Sunday we hope to include the celebration of communion in our service, to remember the death of Jesus and to celebrate the new life that we have in union with our living Lord. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Today is Palm Sunday. It is the beginning of what is typically called "Holy Week." It's a week of reflection and pause. It's a week to slowly move from a parade to the cross to the empty grave. It's a week to consider the renewal that Jesus presents in his coming to this world, becoming like us, to take the sins of the world on himself. It's a week to consider how that renewal is being lived out in our own lives.

A couple of suggestions for readings have been sent by email or posted on our church Facebook page: Bethel CRC Brockville. These are offered as something to guide you in your reflection and in your renewal.

The ripples of renewal. Are you seeing it? Are you living it? Let's pray that it has a lasting effect in our lives, in our church and in our community.

Amen.