

Marching to Doom

Matthew 21:1-13

I have always loved Palm Sunday. Spring has arrived. In a week somebody will give me candy in a basket. At church we wave—well, honestly we often wave fern fronds, not palms, but our hearts are in the right place. And our hearts are lifted up. All because we usually stop reading two verses too soon in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus did enter Jerusalem triumphantly on that first Palm Sunday. But then he caused a ruckus at the temple. Witnesses thought he rode into town in order finally to claim his rightful place as Messiah. He did, but that meant riding into town to die. Perhaps this Palm Sunday, as Covid 19 seems poised to hit its apex, we understand better what it means to march toward our own doom.

Writing maybe twenty years later, Matthew remembers Jesus somehow knowing he could borrow somebody's beasts of burden. Matthew sees this fulfills an Old Testament prophecy. In fact, Matthew sees that everything Jesus says and does on this day fulfills a prophecy. The crowds know it, too. As Jesus rides past they chant a Psalm used to laud God's anointed king. All Jerusalem awakens to this man who has come to town. And, Matthew says, they call Jesus “the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.” This *is* an exciting day! What will this prophet do now that he has come to the Holy City? How will he use his powers now that he approaches the temple?

Jesus' answer is to disrupt the corrupt temple market, where men fleece pilgrims with overpriced animals for sacrifice and criminal exchange rates for the coins required for the offerings. Some see this as further evidence he was God's anointed Messiah/king/prophet. He wants to clean up their worship of the Lord. Others see this as further evidence that he is a dangerous man. He threatens those who profit from the corruption. Still others see him as a threat to the fragile truce between the Jews and their Roman masters. How do his actions in the temple strike us?

Palm Sunday in the Year of Covid 19 is a roller coaster ride. It takes us up. It takes us down. But it should not confuse us. We have all the information we need. Jesus came to Jerusalem to meet his cross. He met his cross in order to have a death from which to rise. He rose from the dead to give those who follow him hope. He had a plan and he executed it. Or we should say, he has executed much of it. We still await its fulfillment, which culminates in eternal peace and joy for those who worship him. This is a good place to be, even as dangers and threats surround us.

A week ago Friday twenty-nine doctors and nurses took a flight from Atlanta to New York. Many New York medical personnel have caught the virus, sidelining them just as the crisis hits. Many more are healthy yet frustrated, exhausted, terrified. So these Georgian heroes—like hundreds from across the country—went to offer relief to the system and care to the victims. One nurse, Letha Love, told CNN she was, “Very scared. But I'm here.” She signed up for a six-week rotation, with five twelve hour shifts per week. Love works overnight, which normally is the easiest time for nurses to

work in a hospital. Doctors and visitors are not around at night, making things quieter, smoother for the rest of the personnel.

Not now. Now Letha Love uses one N95 face mask through each shift. Now she uses a caustic hand cleanser and dons gloves before entering every room, reversing the process after leaving every room. Now she Facetimes her 4 year-old daughter and 12 year-old son each morning at 9:00, before falling into bed but struggling to sleep because she is afraid. She has attended the deaths of, she thinks, about a dozen people. And as she told reporter Thomas Lake, “One day you're the nurse. Next day you're the patient. I've seen that a couple of times already.” With that the reporter could think of no further questions. So he said what we say to heroes: “Thank you for your service.”

“Pray for all of us,” Letha Love replied. This is happening from coast to coast. It will happen more as the map fills in from hot spots to hinterland. Let us pray for all of us. Let us pray for victims, for those who care for them, and for those who keep things running, albeit on fumes: for first responders, for factory workers churning out masks and ventilators, for medical researchers, for farmers. Pray for all of us.

But pray not out of fear. Pray with hope. God's plan is still working itself out in history. Easter follows Good Friday follows Palm Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to die. But he died to rise from the dead. And he rose from the dead to give us