

“GROUNDED: FINDING GOD IN THE WORLD”

[NOTE – This sermon series is based on the book of the same title by Diana Butler Bass. I have used Diana’s words, adapted and verbatim, throughout the sermon, mixing them with my own reflections and illustrations. I have bolded the words that come directly from the book.]

PALM SUNDAY

“Commons: We Are the World”

by

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Texts: Zechariah 9:9-10
John 12:12-19

Preached: 4/14/19

On Palm Sunday we are connected with Christians around the world who also lift the palm branch and remember what we call “Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.” We commemorate a parade, but not a planned one, rather an impromptu event that happened in the ancient holy city.

You know the story – people were gathered from all over the known world of that time – a cosmopolitan crowd in the big city for a festival. Then some of them heard that Jesus was coming to town. It seems like before they even saw him they started cutting branches in order to pave his path.

Then they glimpsed him, sitting on a donkey of all things, and they erupted, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel.” They imagined him becoming their king and delivering them from their Roman oppression. Jesus would be king, but of much more than Israel.

They didn’t understand what was happening, and neither did Jesus’ own disciples. But others were suspicious. The fervor of the crowd overwhelmed Jesus’ adversaries...the Pharisees, who said to one another, “the world has gone after him!” The Pharisees had good reason to be concerned.

When people come together, people who are different – people from different countries, who agree to work for a common purpose – amazing things can be accomplished. I watched a beautiful illustration of this Wednesday morning when the National Science Foundation held a press conference. Leaders of an international scientific team of over 200 people from 20 different countries announced a milestone in astrophysics - the first-ever photo of a black hole.

The Event Horizon Telescope project, an international collaboration begun in 2012, used a global network of Earth-based telescopes to obtain the stunning image, seeing what was previously thought to be unseeable!

This black hole resides at the center of Messier 87, a massive galaxy in the nearby Virgo galaxy cluster, but by nearby they mean 55 million light years away. The announcement was made in simultaneous news conferences in Washington, Brussels, Santiago, Shanghai, Taipei and Tokyo.

The amazing physics and mathematics needed to achieve such an image are way beyond my comprehension, but equally amazing to my topic today, is the truly global nature of the collaboration that facilitated this achievement. People, physicists and astronomers from all over the world, worked together, cooperated and coordinated to achieve what none of them could have achieved on their own. It gives me hope for tackling some of our more earthly conundrums.

It's not just physicist who can work together – musicians can, as well. When I was in college there had been a terrible and persistent famine in Africa, particularly Ethiopia. The year was 1985. Popular American musicians came together to form United Support of Artists for Africa. They released a charity single titled "We Are the World." It sold in excess of 20 million copies all over the world and raised over 63 million dollars for famine relief.

"We Are the World" was a unifying song appealing to the need for universal human compassion. The artists assembled formed a laundry list of the biggest stars in the recording industry at the time and were inspiring before they ever opened their mouths – just for the fact that they all stopped their own projects to collaborate on this one...Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon, Kenny Rogers, James Ingram, Tina Turner, and Billy Joel. Michael Jackson and Diana Ross. Dionne Warwick, Willie Nelson, and Al Jarreau. Bruce Springsteen, Kenny Loggins, Steve Perry, and Daryl Hall., Huey Lewis, Cyndi Lauper, and Kim Carnes. Bob Dylan and Ray Charles – an incredible lineup at the time and even now.

The lyrics to the song are timeless and awash in holy images:

There comes a time
When we heed a certain call
When the world must come together as one
There are people dying
Oh, and it's time to lend a hand to life
The greatest gift of all
We can't go on
Pretending day-by-day
That someone, somewhere soon [will] make a change
We're all a part of God's great big family
And the truth, you know, love is all we need

And the chorus:

We are the world

We are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let's start giving
There's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day, just you and me
Oh, send them your heart
So they know that someone cares
And their lives will be stronger and free
As God has shown us by turning stones to bread

And so we all must lend a helping hand

We are the world...

That's our subject for today. "Commons: We are the world." All this Lent we have been exploring how we find God in the world. We can see God in creation and community. Paying attention to these as part of our spiritual life can ground us in our faith.

Last Sunday Pastor Jo concentrated on home and neighborhood, suggesting that these are the places we first encounter love, care, companionship, sharing, forgiveness, community and shared identity. These formative experiences teach us who God is, how He loves us and how we should love one another.

But homes and especially neighborhoods have changed from what they used to be...technology, in particular, continues to stretch our understanding. **Perhaps our biggest challenge in the 21st century is that we have moved to a new global neighborhood and aren't sure how to get along with our new neighbors!** And there's a lot of unhelpful talk coming from our political leaders.

Yet The Bible lifts up a great communal vision of God, the world, and humanity...of a people who know God as an intimate companion, live well with one another, and fulfill God's dream for creation. It is a vision of mutuality, friendship, creativity, conviviality, and generosity.

In the story of the Bible, God's people are to make peace, plant vines and fig trees, treat one another fairly and with compassion and invite strangers into God's tent. We are either cursed or blessed on the basis of our relationships with others and how we care for the land. People prosper when justice reigns. What is broken is restored, what is amiss is made right. It is a vision of a universal feast, a cosmic table around which all humankind is gathered to eat and drink and dance with God.

Our spirituality is tied to our personal experience – the deep realization that dirt is good, water is holy, the sky holds wonder; that we are part of a great web of life, our home is in

God, and our moral life is entwined with that of our neighbor. But none of this is for the sake of feeling good, individual prosperity, or even guaranteeing a blessed afterlife.

It is rather about tracing the threads of the interconnected universe, about finding God in creation and community – and in finding God, discovering that we are really one...Much of religion has lost this binding vision of peace, wisdom, and equanimity here on earth. But real religion, authentic religion, binds us to one another, to God, and to the world. To encounter God here, we must walk out of our buildings, take down our fences, disassemble our walls and discover the life of the commons.

Commons is somewhat similar to neighborhood. At their best, neighborhoods are open tribes that practice hospitality and the Golden Rule. The commons is not that. The commons is what we live for...the public world tribes make together – that serves the good for all...

In an essay published shortly before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote of the dangers of closed tribes as the “great new problem of humankind”:

We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together— black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

He went on to say that all inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors; “all [people] are interdependent” and “all life is interrelated.”

King said that the “worldwide neighborhood” was the result of science and technology, reciting a quick history of inventions from the lightbulb to radio and television, to space travel. These developments had transformed the “architectural pattern” of the world house, “shaking” its foundations and enabling men and women around the world to demand a new and better future of equality, freedom and justice for all. [Now remember, King was writing way back in 1960s!]

Recognizing the world commons calls us to a challenging moral responsibility – dedicating ourselves to participate in God’s concern for the “planetary common good,” doing justice for the earth and all of earth’s people through compassion.

We see played out this week in the story of Jesus’ passion a world we find all too familiar. Indeed, we see the heartless, cold way of the world as Jesus will be arrested, tried, convicted and executed. The Palm Sunday parade shows us that Jesus rode against that...he suggested a different way, the way of the commons.

Pontius Pilate would have preceded Jesus into Jerusalem, wanting to be on hand for the great festival because people were flooding the city from all over the world for Passover. Pilate would be sure to have traveled from his home base in Caesarea, bringing with him a large contingent of troops, riding into the city on a powerful black warhorse bedecked with colors, banners, insignia and armor.

Jesus, of course, arrives on a donkey. And the explanation for that comes from quoting the prophet Zechariah: where the king comes, triumphant and victorious, and humble...in order to make a strong call for peace, as Zechariah expounds, to “cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations ...” (Zechariah 9:9-10). Contrast Pilate on his stallion with Jesus on a donkey and you see the intended message: “Peace on earth, yes, but not peace by Rome’s violent victory, rather peace by God’s humble, non-violent justice.”

Palm Sunday is a day to delight in the joy and glory of that festival parade of Jesus. Even as we endure far too much violence...far too many shouts of hate, let us appreciate the beauty of those unstoppable proclamations: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

But let us imagine Palm Sunday as more of a protest march than a triumphant parade, a witness to the courage of the crowds to worship the One who knows their worth right in front of those who want to keep them quiet, a bold display of the relentless rule of God that destroys death, refuses to be silenced, raises up the least, recovers the lost and saves sinners.

Those are holy moments when we recognize our own humanity in the face of the other – for it is then that we also recognize the face of God. This is salvation, this seeing God in all other faces, the very meaning and purpose of Jesus. It is in Jesus we are forever connected to God and forever connected to one another. We are not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. We share a common life – a common journey – and we are forever bound together by God’s divine love.

We are on a journey with Jesus – a journey toward a world commons of hospitality, justice and peace. --- Unity, relationship, action – it’s pretty simple. Maybe moments that hold compassionate promise happen more often than we notice. All it takes is for courageous souls to break out of complacency and walk the way of Jesus.