

April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday – Online/Remote Worship Service**Sermon – Unstoppable Love**

When I was a little girl growing up in the church,

I loved the special Sundays

– Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter and Palm Sunday.

There was always something exciting or different
for those services:

Candles and light at Christmas,

baskets of produce from garden up at the front on Thanksgiving,

joyful, lively hymns on Easter morning,

and the celebrations on Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday was especially different:

we waved our palm branches, of course,

sometimes marched around the church,

and there was clapping, tambourines and praise songs...

...it was like having a party right in the worship service.

The contrast with Lent is unmistakable.

During the six weeks of Lent, we look inwardly, for the most part.

We take a long, hard look at the darkness,

the brokenness of our world;

we take a long, hard look at what is broken in us, too;

and what weighs us down.

To help ourselves along with that process,

some Christians choose to give something up for Lent;

a hobby or an indulgence or a habit,

and setting that aside makes room

for this time of honesty between us and God.

This year, we've all had to give things up

over Lent,

parts of our lives that it aches to lose.

Lent has always been a serious time for Christians.

At the end of it, Palm Sunday comes

like an explosion of joy.

That joy is a little quieter this year;

we must set our palm branches and folded crosses aside

until next spring,

but even so,

Palm Sunday remains

an invitation to step into joy.

Jesus and his friends set out from Bethany to go to Jerusalem.
At the Mount of Olives, which overlooks the city proper,
Jesus sends two of his followers to round up a donkey colt
from a neighbouring village.

From there, they descend into the Kidron valley,
Jerusalem's great walls and the golden gate
visible in the distance.

As this strange procession passes through the valley
and up toward the city,
growing in numbers,
people cut branches and throw their cloaks on the road,
shouting and cheering.

Jesus passes through the gates.

These aren't your ordinary friendly garden gates...
...ancient gates in a walled city were built thick and sturdy,
set into stone walls, meant to stop an invading army,
with antechambers and galleries above.

The procession moves with Jesus
from daylight to the shadow under the gates,
and back into the light,
now in the city and heading towards the Temple.
Christ's triumphal entry
into the great city of God's people, Jerusalem.

The psalmist writes,
"Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord."
As Lent ends, as we begin to journey with Jesus
through his final days in Jerusalem,
toward Good Friday
and then on to Easter Sunday:
What does it mean for us today
to pass through those fierce, ancient gates
and follow Jesus
the rest of the way to the Cross?

We expend a lot of energy and effort
turning away from the things that we know are bad for us,
great or small, serious or silly.
Lent is all about that:
setting aside things we don't need,
or parts of ourselves that we see

are not life-giving,
or burdens of guilt or fear,
anger or hurt
that we don't need
to carry
any longer.

That process, that letting go
of what we carry that weighs us down,
of what we do that hurts us or others...
...it's hard.
Turning away from our familiar burdens and habits
is hard.

It's made harder still when we forget
that turning away from what is not life-giving
means turning toward
what does give life;
turning away from fear
is also turning to God.
And that is a joyful act,
a cause for celebration,
for palm-waving and shouts of rejoicing.
Passing through those gates of righteousness,
opened wide for us by Jesus,
lets us...let go
of what is not life-giving in our lives.
It sets us free.

These last three weeks,
since our lives began to be impacted by covid-19,
we've all been given a crash course
in what's necessary and important and essential,
and what is not.
There are things that matter less
than we thought they did.
And there are things that
matter more.
The hardest losses to bear for many of us
is the physical distance
we have to place between ourselves and our families and friends,
and the loss of purpose and security
in being sent home from work.

Sacrificing what we want to do
for what must be done,
for our own health and well-being,
and for others, too.
These are difficult days;
we're getting a clearer sense of what matters to us,
of what makes our lives meaningful...
...even as we are being asked to set it aside for a time,
for one another's well-being.

This is a serious, thoughtful time for us all;
but there is still room for joy.
Our Christian faith gives us the vocabulary,
the words and ideas and mindset,
to make sense
of what we're going through right now.

When we hear about putting others needs ahead of our own wants,
when we talk about letting go of fear and worry,
when we recognise that turning away
from what is immediately, selfishly satisfying
means turning toward something better...
...we've heard all that said before;
we know all about it,
because that is how Jesus
has always taught us to live.
And it's never clearer,
never more celebrated,
than it is this week, during Holy Week:
sacrifice is ultimately not about loss,
but about love.

That's what Jesus' life, death and resurrection teaches us:
sacrifice is not about giving something up
or having something taken away from us;
sacrifice is not about loss,
it's about love.

So we stay home,
and be good and loving neighbours;
we don't take more than we need for ourselves,
so that everyone will have enough;
and we are not afraid,
because God sent his life-giving Son to save us,

because God is good,
because God's steadfast love
endures forever.

God's unstoppable love is shown to us
and in the end, freely given to us,
through the events of Holy Week.
Whether it's the joyous shouts of hosanna
ringing through the gates of Jerusalem,
the angry cries of crucify him on Good Friday
or the amazed, hopeful call
that he is risen indeed
on Easter morning...
...the thread that connects all three,
the driving force and purpose behind it all,
is love.
And we see that love,
that God's love,
endures.

It cannot be stopped by any broken, hard thing in this world;
indeed it transforms what's broken and painful;
God's love makes the ordinary rich with meaning,
remakes need into abundance,
takes the humiliation and pain of dying on the Cross
and turns it
into an act of sacrificial, self-giving love.

It's that same unstoppable, enduring love
that invites us, on Palm Sunday,
to let go,
to ditch every Lenten thing we don't need
that is weighing us down,
and join that palm-waving,
hosanna-shouting procession;
to pass through
those wide-open gates
of righteousness
and follow Jesus, all the way to the Cross and into love.

Picture in your minds those high city gates once more,
wide open and waiting for God's people
to march through,
following Jesus,

all the way to the Cross
and beyond, into new life.

Before we had to stop gathering together here at the church,
our music director and our choir
were practicing a beautiful Welsh hymn
for us to learn together this Easter season.
It's called "Here is Love,"
and we'll still sing it someday.
I learned it myself when I was living in Bristol in England
and going to Buckingham Baptist Church.

There's a verse in the song that talks about
a different kind of gate than the sort you walk through,
than the kind we've been thinking about today;
a floodgate.
The hymnwriter gives us a beautiful image:
a massive floodgate,
holding back a vast tide of grace.
At the end of this Holy Week,
those floodgates burst open,
and love and grace,
like mighty rivers,
mightier even, than the St. Clair,
begin to pour, unstoppable,
into the world and into our lives.

That's where we're headed;
But right now, with our palm branches and our shouts of hosanna,
our loud procession up to Jerusalem:
we are accepting the invitation from God
to leave the darkness of fear and brokenness behind
and step into joy.

We are marching through the opened gates of righteousness,
and toward those floodgates,
through the shadows of this wonderful and terrible week ahead.
The tidal wave of God's gracious and unstoppable love
waits for us at the Cross,
and he will meet us there.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.