

Becoming Aware
Sunday, April 5th, 2020
Palm Sunday || Pastor Christy Wright

We invite you to light a candle at 9 AM and join us in prayer and devotion

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

What a year it has been for our youth and school staff! With our entire schedules upended, and unsure whether we will be able to return to school at all this year, some schools have encouraged their teachers to reach out in creative ways. One of the most heartwarming events I've seen is a mobile school parade. Kids stand in their front yards while school staff drive by, waving and honking their horns. And the kids have gotten creative too, making signs to express their gratitude for their school, banging on pots and pans and singing. What an incredible display of solidarity, even when we must be apart. What a way to have a parade: humble, simple, but also breathtaking and tear-inducing.

At this time, we know that life is not what it once was. We are beginning to adapt to a new reality before us, and even in the midst of the unknown, we are celebrating even the smallest things and the most humble of our community. We are reaching out to friends and neighbors; we are leaving supplies in our front yard for folks who need it most; we are volunteering; we are rising to the occasion. And the celebrations that abound are only a glimpse of the party that is to come. Can you imagine what it will be like when the stay-at-home order lifts? Can you picture the day when the last case of COVID19 has been cured? We are getting hints of the festivities to come, and I know we all cannot wait until it is here.

This morning's scripture reading tells us of the parade that Jesus encounters as he enters Jerusalem. He rides into town on a donkey, and the people welcome him in with whatever they have - waving palm branches, spreading their cloaks on the road, cheering him into the city. This, too, like the school parades, also hint at the celebration to come, when Jesus has been resurrected, the joy of the disciples of being reunited with the Risen One. We are getting a glimpse of the parties, the connections, the freedom.

But we also know that Holy Week is upon us. We know the story: Jesus enters Jerusalem, dines with his friends, is betrayed, arrested, and crucified. It isn't easy. We want to skip over this part and get straight to Easter. I don't blame you, because I want to skip over it, too. But when we identify with this moment in Jesus' story, when we become aware of the reality before us, we will also become aware of the hope that is on the horizon. Our awareness of our current situation allows us to tap into the future, to see a new reality, to get glimpses of the celebrations, the gatherings, and the love that we will share when we are able to be back together again.

Becoming aware requires us to take stock of our emotions. What are you feeling? How is it manifesting in your body? I invite you to breathe in deeply. Feel the gratitude fill your lungs. And exhale, letting go of all worries that may hold you down. Breathe in deeply, and breathe in the hope of Easter, for it is here. And exhale, knowing that Christ's peace goes with us wherever we find ourselves.

Becoming aware also invites us to dream of a new reality, of what the future will look like for us. I invite you to breathe in deeply as you think about the first thing you will do when the stay-at-home order lifts. And exhale, as you think about the people you will visit and the parties you will throw. Inhale, and think about the places you will see, where you will travel. Exhale, and be present to this moment, here and now, becoming aware of our reality and our future.

As we enter Holy Week, I invite you to meditate on the enclosed palm cross, recognizing that it is a symbol of the celebration to come. May we become aware of the glimpses of hope that shimmer all around us, even when all feels lost. May we honor the small things that give us joy in this moment, knowing that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is the source of all joy, peace, and everlasting life. Amen.

Love Feast

As this week would typically be Communion Sunday, I invite you to join in this Love Feast service from home, a way of breaking bread together around the table that connects us though we are separated at this time. In preparation for this time of worship, I invite you to make a comfort food that reminds you of home or of our community. It may be a cup of coffee, or it may be a loaf of banana bread. If you have a favorite recipe, please send it to Pastor Christy so she can share it with the congregation in the next mailing. This would be a wonderful way for us to stay connected through our favorite Methodist tradition: food! Enjoy your comforts of the table as we read through this service together. Many thanks to Dr. Marcia McFee for this beautiful liturgy.

When we “break bread” together as a church in our worship, we remember that Jesus invited folks to his table as part of his ministry, not just at the Last Supper. So we wanted to create a way for all of us to break bread together with whatever we have at our homes. So, gather your comfort food and join us at the table.

Jesus used the parable of a great banquet to which all people are invited in order to talk about what the “kin-dom” of God, the family of God, looks like. He said, “Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled.” He often invited the most unlikely guests to his meal-times, confounding the disciples. In this way, he was encouraging a deep love and connection beyond social norms. He knew that we humans need connection and inclusion. Jesus comforts us, saying “you have a place at the table” and Jesus challenges us to make sure we are doing the same—that all people know they are welcome in our hearts, in our homes, in our churches—even if we can’t physically be with each other right now.

It is difficult at this moment not to be near some of the people we love and might be worried about. Take a moment and remember the people you wish were right there next to you at your table today.

Jesus is no longer physically on earth, yet every time we gather around a table and we call him to mind, he is present with us in Spirit. And so too, our loved ones are with us. Let this be a comfort to us.

We also want to call to mind the people we cannot name, whose names we do not know. But we know they need our prayers and God’s comfort.

For those who have lost loved ones

For those who are sick and recovering

For those who are caring for loved ones who are sick at home

For those who are caring for persons in medical care

For those who are separated from loved ones

For those who are feeling alone and isolated

For those who are helping and are so very tired

For those who are struggling to find friends, food, and comfort

For those who are afraid

I invite you to take a deep breath on behalf of all those we do not know and cannot call by name. As we do so, we know that God knows who needs our prayers and the Spirit, Breath of God, is blowing from within us outward as a Spirit of Compassion and Presence.

Blessings at the table are part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Indeed, Jesus adapted his Jewish ritual blessing spoken before and after meals. He asked us to remember him whenever we break bread and raise a cup in thanksgiving. This is why we call our communion prayers the “Great Thanksgiving.” In this feast of love and comfort, we can call to mind things for which we are deeply grateful. I invite you to think of a couple of things that you are grateful for in this moment.

And so I invite you to raise with me a plate of “something” on your table, or a glass of whatever you are drinking, and let us bless it in this way aloud to God our Creator:

Holy Comforter, we gather in your name invited by Jesus, bound together with your Spirit, in union with each other. Feed our bodies and our spirits with your comforting presence so that we might be your comfort to others. Bless this food and break open our hearts. Bless this drink, and pour out your love. Amen.

As you pass and fill your plates, getting ready to continue to eat your comfort food, I invite you to imagine what extravagant love looks like as you reach across the social distance to loved ones, to friends, and even acquaintances or strangers.¹

And now, may the peace of the Lord Christ go with you wherever God may send you; may God guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm; may God bring you home rejoicing at the wonders God has shown you; may God bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.²

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: God’s hand in medical advancements, doctors, nurses, medical professionals, nursing home caregivers, police, firefighters, EMTs, and all essential workers who still must report to work and cannot stay home. Holding in our hearts: all those affected by the Coronavirus and the health of our world, all those who have lost income due to the virus, Barry, the family of Bernice, Betty, Dell, Evelyn, the family of Judy Bartlett in her loss, Melissa for her shoulder injury recovery, our prayer shawl recipients, Priscilla, Rachel who is a nurse at Tufts, the Reim family, the United Methodist Church, all those who struggle with addiction. Note that this list will renew each month.

Community Announcements

- *Ad Council* will meet by phone conference on **Wednesday, April 8th at 10:07 AM**. You may dial in by calling (978) 990-5000. Our access code is 719365#. Internet access is not required. If you call and receive a busy tone, please try again. This is a free service, and we are testing its capabilities before investing in other software. By dialing in at 10:07 AM, we are avoiding high call traffic times that occur on the hour.
- **THANK YOU** to Paul Ayers for his many years of service to our church as our treasurer! He has done incredible work for our church. Paul will be stepping back from his responsibilities in June, and we are now looking for a new treasurer. Let us be in prayer and discernment as we seek a new treasurer, and please contact Pastor Christy by April 15th if you are interested in serving. A Finance Committee Meeting will take place in the second half of April to discuss responsibilities and a transition plan.
- *Offerings* are still being encouraged during this time. Please consider mailing your offering to our church PO Box, so that we are able to continue in ministry through Christ for the transformation of the world. Offerings can be mailed to: George Whitefield United Methodist Church, PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585
- *Heifer Project* mission is still ongoing. Our Mission Project for Lent is supporting Heifer Project International, an organization that raises funds for economic development for folks in need across the world through environmental sustainability and other methods. We invite you to reach out if you haven’t received a Heifer calendar and bank to “feed the hungry and feed our faith” through this effort. Checks can be made out to George Whitefield UMC with the memo line “Heifer Project.” See Pastor Christy if you have any questions. Thank you for supporting this mission effort during Lent!
- *The Sharing Cupboard* is experiencing high volumes of need at this time. If you are able to donate jelly, jam, coffee, or household products such as hand sanitizer, disinfecting cleaning wipes or spray, bar soap, toilet paper, paper towels, or laundry detergent, it would be greatly appreciated.
- We are disappointed to say that all church services will continue to be suspended until further notice at Gov. Baker’s orders, which means we will not be able to meet together for Easter. For the latest updates on our response to COVID-19, be sure to check out our website at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com or Like us on Facebook. You can also call the church number at (508) 867-3667 for more information.

¹ Marcia McFee, *Comfort Food: A Feast of Love*, www.worshipdesignstudio.com.

² Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

A Companion Guide
The Upper Room Daily Devotionals
Monday, April 6th through Saturday, April 11th
Written by Pastor Christy Wright

We invite you to light a candle at 9 AM daily and join us in prayer and devotion. If you do not have a copy of The Upper Room Daily Devotionals, let Pastor Christy know & she will make sure you get one.

Monday, April 6th, 2020

Read Psalm 34:1-8

“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who love and know God, and delivers them.”

One of the most compelling moments in this passage for me is the feeling that God looks after us, even in the midst of chaos and the unknown. Angels surround us, and we are never alone, and we are never without care. When the world feels like it is caving in, when we hear bad news from our doctor, when we hear about COVID19 on the radio or TV, it can be so incredibly overwhelming. But the good news is that we know God is with us, and God has deployed angels to be with us. These angels may take the shape of friends who call us, or neighbors who drop by groceries, or just the reassurance that we are not alone. Angels surround us. Take heart. We are not alone.

Let Us Pray Together

God of all creation, You surround us with love everyday. You see our struggles, and You hear our cries for help. And You show up, even in ways that we may not recognize. Open our eyes to see Your presence anew each day, knowing that we are forever enveloped in Your love, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, April 7th, 2020

Read Revelation 22:1-5

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Here, again, we encounter angels who are guiding us on our way, pointing out the goodness before us, even in the midst of struggles in the world. Not only do they name the water that pours forth, but also how the earth itself, how creation in its essence, can provide hope for the world. Our deepest prayer these days has been for the healing of the nations, and I am reminded of my visit to the UN Church Center in New York City on several occasions. The stained glass window in the interfaith chapel is in the form of God’s eyes, watching over all that happens across the street at the UN and beyond, a sign of hope that God is with us, and that God’s will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven. God desires healing, and indeed, so do we, and the vision of wholeness is nigh. Keep watching. Keep waiting. God is here.

Let Us Pray Together

God of peace, when we survey our broken world, we can feel so defeated and hopeless. But Your scripture points out that there is healing, peace, and new creation waiting to be born. Be present with us, God, through our doubts and fears, and help us to witness the ways that You are showing up in our world, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, April 8th, 2020

Read 1 Peter 2:18-24

“When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten.”

I’m not going to lie - this is a tough scripture to read and interpret. It is problematic in that it not only justifies slavery, but also poor treatment of the oppressed. In a world where so many folks are already hurting, it may be easier to lash out in fear and wound others than to act in mercy and grace, treating one another with all gentleness and love, compassion and patience. Everyone is processing this new reality differently, and we are called to love one another as God first loved us. Remember, beloved, you are loved; therefore go, and love others.

Let Us Pray Together

God our Healer, Your compassionate love extends past our current circumstances and reaches into the depths of creation. We know that You love us, and we know that Your love calls us to deeper compassion with others. Help us to be present for one another in ways that are graceful, gentle, and life-giving, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, April 9th, 2020 || Maundy Thursday**Read 2 Peter 3:1-9****“Remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets.”**

As I reflect and meditate on the memories of those who have gone before me, I'm reminded of how our “spiritual bank account” has been filled by those great saints, those who taught us lessons of patience, grace, and love abounding. Look around you: how are you witnessing God's love pour out through your family, friends, and community? How can we make “deposits” in our spiritual bank accounts, so that in the tough times, we can make “withdrawals” that remind us of God's everlasting love? And in what ways are you making deposits into others' spiritual bank accounts?

Let Us Pray Together

God of relationality, You remind us of how precious our friendships and connections with one another are. Your wisdom is a gift we have received through the Holy Spirit, and we're thankful for the ways it manifests itself through our relationships. Be our guide as we navigate life together, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friday, April 10th, 2020 || Good Friday**Read Luke 18:15-17****“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them.”**

I watched a truly heartbreaking video this week that gave me insight into the sacrifices our front-line workers are encountering. A doctor was returning home after a long shift at the hospital, caring for folks in a COVID19 ward. He was still dressed in his blue scrubs, and his little son came running up to him, arms outstretched to embrace his daddy in love. But his dad quickly held up his hands to stop his son from coming any closer, saying, “No, no, don't hug me,” while tears streamed down his face. This doctor couldn't hug his son. In the face of our social isolation, Jesus offers us an embrace that provides us peace beyond understanding. Cling to Jesus, our rock and our salvation, and let all children embrace their heavenly God.

Let Us Pray Together

God our protective Father, our nurturing Mother, You hold us when human touch fails us. You embrace us when we are prevented from embracing each other. Be our comfort and be our peace, even as the tears stream down our faces, and help us to see the day when we can be together again, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, April 11th, 2020 || Holy Saturday**Read Matthew 28:1-10****“After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.”**

When I was in college, my favorite meditative practice was to take a drive early in the morning to the closest beach and watch the sunrise. But I didn't just go to watch the light; I went to wait in the darkness. I would time my trips so that I had to sit in silence, reflecting in the pre-dawn light how I knew the day would come. I could watch how the horizon's colors would shift and change, how the wind would pick up, and eventually how the brightness of the sun would burst forth with a sudden power that would overwhelm me. But then I would feel the sun on my skin, the warmth of the day to come, and know that the wait in darkness was worth it. In this season of Lent, of Easter just around the corner, may you remember that daylight *will* come. We may be waiting in the pre-dawn light now, but soon, we will be rejoicing together once more.

Let Us Pray Together

God of Light, You are with us as we wait in darkness for the hope that is to come. You are our peace and comfort even as we grieve and experience anxiety. Be our strength, God, that we might witness Your breaking forth into our world in a new dawn, in the new day that is to come through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.