

A Sermon for Palm Sunday April 5, 2020

Gospel texts: **Matthew 21.1–11** and **Matthew 26.14—27.66**

A poem titled:

Otherwise (*Jane Kenyon*)

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

This is an odd day in the liturgical life of the church. Not just because we are 2 people in a chapel, talking into a camera in the hopes that someone is on the other end, but because of the grand sweep of the story we are here to tell. We are called upon to compress two major events into one today.

And so we begin with the telling of the last journey Jesus makes into the city of Jerusalem. We've just heard Matthew's account; in which Jesus tells 2 of his disciples to go into a neighbouring village on the outskirts of the city, and there they will find a donkey, a colt tied and waiting. "*Should anyone ask what you are doing*", Jesus says; "*tell them the Lord needs them*".

Jesus knows what they don't know – what you and I *do* know – that the end is coming; that Jesus has foreknowledge, and has made preparations, for the week that is about to unfold. This week will be his last. We are entering the *Otherwise* time!

And so they approach the city, a city swelled to bursting; 10's of thousands jammed together, as many as 150,000 historians tell us, in a city which normally held 30,000 in those day; gathered to celebrate the great Passover; God's tremendous act of liberation - that in their ancestor's time; had released them from lives of slavery in a foreign land. Now once again they yearn for liberation, from a foreign land who occupies their very home.

The crowds begin tearing up grass to wave as banners, to carpet his path – as they sing out their joy and praise of the one who comes in the name of the Lord – this is their moment – the Messiah has come; Matthew says of this day; "*the whole city is in turmoil*".

"*Hosanna!*" They cry out - a word which is both a term of jubilation and praise; and in the original Aramaic means; *save, or rescue*. God has come to save them!

So this is how we begin today. We start with the Gospel reading that sets the stage for the events that will unfold in the week to come. But the rubrics, or the instructions, for this Sunday also call upon us to read a 2nd Gospel. The long Gospel story which tells the entire story of the week we call; Holy Week; a week which will reveal betrayal, rejection, desertion, trial, and death upon a cross. The thinking being that if we leave **this** Sunday without the cross in plain view, we cannot fully appreciate the miracle of the resurrection we will celebrate next Sunday.

The joy that has Jerusalem busting at the seams today is born out of a long history of disappointment and pain, generations upon generations, who have longed for

God's intervention in a story that has gone wrong. That turned, Otherwise. It is the contrast; what was; and what is, that makes the possibility of a different future even thinkable;

The other challenge we face in hearing this story, is that *we* already know the outcome; there is no need to give a spoiler alert here. You and I know *now* that the tomb is empty. The characters in today's Gospel do not.

On June 30th 1997, a single mother living on welfare published a book that had been growing in her for most of her life. Echoes of her own story of despair and tragedy, darkness and doubt, found life in the pages of; *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The series of books which followed the success of that first novel would make this young woman, not only famous, but wealthy beyond her wildest imagining. Eventually translated into 73 languages they became the best-selling book series in history; to date more than 400 million copies sold.

In the 6th book, of this 7 part series, Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School, who was both father figure and mentor to the orphaned Harry; to the shock of those 400 million readers - died. The great master wizard, the embodiment of goodness and light, in the never ending battle against evil and darkness, is killed by one of his own colleagues.

And that 6th book ends with everyone wondering how the future will unfold. In true fairy-tale fashion, everyone anticipated, *myself included*, as I read them with my children; that this was all just an illusion, part of a bigger story we just weren't privy to yet. That surely when the 7th and final book was published, everything would end happily ever-after. Dumbledore would return having cast some magical spell upon himself (I hope I'm not spoiling this for anyone) and all the pieces would be put back together; that his supposed death would make sense. How could it not be Otherwise?

It would be 2 years before the 7th and final installment would be published. Two years of speculation, 2 years of suspended, hope!

Because no one, with the exception of the author, JK Rowling herself, knew how the story would end.

You see THAT is what this day we call Palm Sunday was like – in the moment.

That is what makes the events that unfold over this coming week we call *holy* so startling. And why the cross of execution, on that hill far away, which begins to come into clearer focus, with each passing day, seem so unthinkable. God wouldn't build up our hopes this way only to have those hopes dashed upon the rocks?

But I bet your own life has had those moments, hasn't it. Joy and sorrow often go hand in hand. Happy beginnings, full of hope; journeys of faith, take twists and turns we never see coming.

We find ourselves now in a moment of history where we do not know the ending. We know what is happening, lives are on hold, YOUR life is on hold, jobs lost, investments shrinking, business shuttered, churches locked! I visit my daughter now through a porch window; people are dying in unimaginable numbers across this planet, in real time – we *don't* know what will happen tomorrow, because this is a road we have not travelled before. We are in the Otherwise time!

AND where is God?

Where is the God we convinced ourselves looked after us, kept us comfortable and safe? We knew if we lived decent lives, didn't step too far out of line that God would smile on us. Even if we weren't overly religious, bad things don't happen to good people. Do they? Well they do, and good things happen to bad people, maybe you've noticed. So what does that do to what we thought was faith? That's the soul wrestling question that the disciples faced, that we face.

The poem that I opened with, *Otherwise*, was written by the poet Jane Kenyon, who died, tragically in 1995, at the age of 47, from leukemia. How does one find beauty, hope, grace, and faith even when the journey is into a fear filled unknown?

Jane Kenyon's husband was also a poet, Donald Hall, who died just 2 years ago at the age of 90. In reflecting back on those years of Jane's diagnosis, treatment, and death, he shares in his writing; that their greatest strength came, not from the hope offered by the latest advanced medical treatments, or best outcome statistics; but from those most honest, and human; those willing to put their own vulnerability on the line to journey with them even as that journey's end became clear.

Quoting from his book; *The Best Day the Worst Day; life with Jane Kenyon*

*He writes: “No one ever minced words with us; no one condescended or minimized the danger. Mary Roach was the nurse who was the best explainer of all. She had the talent to speak with careful clarity, and her mercies did not end with her articulate intelligence. When we first heard about Jane’s protocol [the treatment regime, options, and schedule] and its intensifications, we were battered by the quantity of information. Confused, we asked questions of Mary **after** the doctors left. Mary found us a protocol of a past ALL [Acute lymphoblastic leukemia] patient, photocopied it, and left it with us as an example. As Mary talked us through the sample, she gave explanations of chemical or medical processes and procedures, in language that even technophobic right-brained poets could follow. She spoke behind her transparent-framed glasses, with her cap of grey hair, in sentences that were comprehensible, without jargon or acronyms, words neat and precise without pedantry – and all the time, as she spoke, steady tears rolled down her cheeks.” **

Where is God in the story that will unfold in scripture this week? Ah, but that’s just it. God is there, that’s the curious thing we may overlook. Our focus will be drawn to the cast of characters that will take center stage; Judas who will betray him, Peter, his trusted friend, who will find his courage fail in the moment it mattered most; Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod, set on his elimination as a political threat, and the crowds they incite to turn against their own.

But there are also those that have the courage to rise amid the challenge, who will poke holes of compassionate love and light, in the darkness that seems all encompassing. Simon of Cyrene, that will lift the cross bar from Jesus shoulders, The women who gather on the hill to keep vigil, the one being crucified with him, who proclaims Jesus’ innocence, a soldier who’s heart is moved, Joseph of Arimathea who will claim his body and carry it to its resting place.

It might have been, Otherwise.

And therein I believe is our hope. We are not alone in this present struggle. May we celebrate those who care for us, and care about us; for those who are putting themselves in harm’s way for no other reason than the hope they embrace and for the love and compassion that crosses all boundaries.

There may be deep shadows of unknowing in the days to come, but if this week tells us anything worth holding onto, in the present moment, it is that God weaves hope into the fabric of life, even when life seems; Otherwise.

* From: *The Best Day the Worst Day; life with Jane Kenyon* by Donald Hall
Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston 2005 page 44