



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Things will never be the same
Palm Sunday

Matthew 21

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Matthew 21.1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying 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. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵"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." ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The 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!" ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

These are not normal times—we must be resilient

I don't have to tell you, these are not normal times. The number of COVID cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are still sharply rising. And it's not just that. These are times that are stressing our families, our public systems, and our trust in our leaders and one another as citizens. On top of all of that, we are forced to live and act in ways that we've never lived before. We must physically separate ourselves from our supports in life: friends, extended family, faith communities. And it's taking its toll on us.

In some ways we're not so different than that crowd of people who lined the road to Jerusalem when Jesus rode into town. We're in trouble—save us! But Jesus' saving grace didn't look anything like the people hoped it would. In fact, what he showed them was right in the palm of their hands.

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Right in the palm of our hands. Have you ever wondered why some people when faced with a difficult situation, just like this, seem not only to survive but actually thrive? That's what we know as resilience. Today I want to talk with you about being resilient. And what Jesus teaches us about being resilient.

When I think of resilience I think of Ariana, a woman that Karin and I worked with in Brazil in a *favela* there. Favelas are underserved and dangerous places. Opportunity runs low and desperation runs high as many barely eke out a living day to day. Though Ariana was neglected and abused by her family, she got an education and got out of the favela. Only to return to it—to serve others. How did she do it? Most of her peers didn't make it. Yes, Ariana, embodied resilience.

This morning I want to talk about how we can all develop resilience, especially in times like this. And what Jesus has to teach us about being resilient, particularly in our Palm Sunday scripture. But first, a definition of resilience.

Resilience is the ability to withstand, persevere—and even thrive—in situations that are challenging. It is the ability to bounce back or even roll a new and better way when life is hard. We all know people who are resilient, right? People who weather incredibly difficult storms in life, and keep on going. What I hope you see today is that God has created us all to be resilient.

For the last 7 or 8 years I've done some consulting and coaching on resilience and have had the opportunity to learn a lot about it. What I've learned is that social scientists have been studying resilience for decades...trying to get at that question of why some people face difficulties and make it, and others don't. What the studies have taught us is that resilience is not some trait that we're either born with or not born with. Resilience can be learned. And practiced. Though there are a number of ways to practice resilience, I find it helpful to boil it down to the 3 Cs.

The 3 Cs of resilience. Change, Curiosity, and Control.

Change is inevitable—except from vending machines

Resilient individuals understand that change—not constancy!—is the norm in life. AND, that those changes may present opportunities for growth, rather than only threats to security. When we are resilient we understand that change is the rule rather than the exception. And that change is a good thing, because you can learn from it.

I don't need to tell you that our world is changing right now. Even as we hunker down to minimize and stop this virus, we're already thinking about how life will be different when it's finally over. How will we relate to one another differently? How will our churches function? Will our business stay afloat? If it wasn't clear to us before, it should be now—change is part of life.

As people of faith, we don't have to read very far in the Bible to see that **Change** has always been a constant. In the Bible we have this amazing record of these life-changing and society-shaping moments, and responses to that change. From breaking the bonds of slavery leading to a new nation and identity, the new Christian community in the Book of Acts figuring out how to live and follow Jesus without him there next to them. Change after change after change.

In today's scripture—Change is exactly what that crowd in Jerusalem was looking for as they shouted *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

The scene probably looked more like a desperate political rally than it did the hymns we sing of cherubic children cheering and waving little palms. This crowd was more likely at the fevered edge of desperation and hope. "Hosanna! Save us Son of David!" They wanted Jesus to be the new religious and political king. The beginning of a religious and political revolution that would overthrow Rome and restore the dignity of Israel. But as we know, that's not the change

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that was in store for them. Or us. More on that in a minute.

I'll spare you my Bob Dylan impression, but he was right: The times they are a-changing. Always. Change is the first C.

Curiosity

Curiosity killed the cat...but satisfaction brought it back.

We all know the saying that "curiosity killed the cat." But did you know that there's a concluding phrase to that very familiar beginning? The full quote is: *Curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction brought it back.* Now I'm not sure how the whole nine lives thing functions in all of this, but this less familiar ending casts curiosity in a whole new light. Instead of being a quality that can cost a life, it is a quality that is so valued that losing your life is not only worth it, but has some sort rejuvenating power!

Curiosity is a gift from God that has served humanity well. Imagine where we would be as humankind if we didn't have the ability to say, "I wonder what would happen if..." Again thinking about this in God-terms, Curiosity recognizes that we live in a world that is important and meaningful; and a world that is worth our attention and engagement as more than just passive observers.

Resilient people practice curiosity with the world around them. They engage their world with questions and inquiry. They try new activities, they are involved in life. Right now,... we need curiosity to spur us forward to solve the problems we face. We need curious scientists coming up with COVID-19 medicines, we need curious medical personnel finding new solutions for treatment, we need curious church folks to keep coming up with ways we can serve and worship and create community. This week I read a great example of how curiosity is literally saving lives in a way that you may have never thought.

Mask 19—In France and Spain, people knew that the rates of domestic violence, especially violence against women and

children, was rising during nation-wide lockdowns. But with everyone sequestered at home, they wondered (curiosity!) how they could help those who needed help. "How can those who need help report abuse and get help even while under orders to stay at home." This curiosity led them to an innovative solution. Since drugstores were still open they set up a system so women can now report at drugstores and the word will get to the authorities. They can even use the codewords "mask 19" if they can't talk openly.

We know this is not a Spanish and French problem. If you or someone you love is experiencing abuse, call 1-800-799-safe. Or call us here, and we will help you get connected to get safe.

Curiosity empowering resilient women in the face of crisis and enabling them to exercise what control they have. Which leads us to our last C, control.

Control

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Control freak. Now-you-say-control-freak-who!

That's not really the kind of control I'm talking about. Resilient people possess the belief that no matter the circumstance we can influence the events around us through your own efforts. Even if its just controlling our response to those events.

I think of Nelson Mandela—thrown into jail for 28 years. What control did he possibly have, imprisoned, and humiliated daily by the guards?! He exerted what control he had as he rallied his fellow prisoners for better conditions, earned his Bachelor of Law degree from his cell, and influenced the anti-apartheid movement that would lead to his eventual release from prison, and election as the country's first black head of state.

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We're not all Mandelas, but it's not just heroes like Mandela. It's everyday people like you and me. It's the person who gets a cancer diagnosis and owns of their medical decisions and treatments and decides to keep living their best life. It's the partner who is abused and saves her pennies to flee a dangerous situation. To a lesser extent, it's all of us, now living in quarantine. It surely doesn't feel heroic, but it's washing our hands, and staying at home, it's keeping physical distance. And it's caring for the vulnerable in our communities. It's joining together in worship right now. And it will certainly be rebuilding lives after this is over.

Control. The belief what we do makes a difference. And not only in our life, but in the lives of others and the world around us. Control acknowledges that God has given us some sense of purpose in this world. And—that with God's help—we have some responsibility for this world. Sometimes we are even so bold as to think of ourselves as co-creators with God. What we do—or do not do—makes a real-life difference to others and even to God. Moses, Sarah, Rahab, Esther, Jesus, Paul...they all believed that they had a task or duty to perform, and they stepped up and they did it. They exercised what control they had.

And what does all of this have to do with Palm Sunday? Do you remember in the scripture how Jesus had prearranged Palm Sunday unfolding? Sometimes we look at events in the Bible and we think, "Wow, unbelievable that it just unfolded like that. Must be a God thing. God took care of it all."

That's not what the scripture says here. Jesus took control, clearly prearranging the prophecy fulfilling, four-legged, donkey express. And then, disappointing thousands in the process.

Here's what I mean...About 200 years before Jesus' procession into Jerusalem, Israel was under the rule of the Seleucid Empire [that stretched from modern day Turkey all the way to what is now Pakistan.] This Seleucids forbade Jewish religious practice. In fact, when Jerusalem was conquered by the Seleucids, they are said to have marched into

the Temple and placed their idols, and even pig's blood at the altar. The ultimate signs of disrespect, humiliation, and conquest. They renamed cities, and forced their religions upon the Israelites, and brutally punished and executed anyone who got in their way.

Over time a resistance movement formed, and what is known as a Maccabean Revolt took root. The leaders of this revolt, Judas "The Hammer" Maccabee. That was his actual nickname! The Hammer led an armed guerilla resistance that eventually took back control of Jerusalem.

When they took back Jerusalem the city celebrated the arrival of these military saviors—guess how?—by waving palms. The Hammer and his men cleansed and rededicated the Temple in what became the first Hanukkah.¹

So significant was that moment, that palms became a national symbol of ethnicity, pride, triumph and victory (2 Maccabees 10:7 and 1 Mac. 13:51).

And 200 years later We have a crowd. Longing for liberation. Under the fist of a foreign occupying power—this time Rome. In Jerusalem. With palms. Shouting "Save us!" And I've got to think Jesus disappointed thousands in the crowd that day. Thousands who were looking for a hero in the only way they had known to look for heroes. A nationalistic military savior who would save the day, and let us get back to normal life. (The Hammer on horse)

But what they got was this. A leader who used control in a radically different way. A savior whose reign would be compassion, love and grace.²

A reign that expressed an entirely different kind of control. And a reign that—to this day—invites all of us to take part, to express what control we have. We are part of the plan!

¹According to Rabbinic Tradition, the Maccabees could only find one jug of sealed oil—which should have lasted only one day, but miraculously lasted eight days.

²There's no doubting why Jesus chose to enter on a donkey, not a warhorse. It's right after this in Luke that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem saying, "If only you had known the things that made for peace."

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Total paradigm shift. It was something that even the disciples had a hard time wrapping their heads around, until much later.

And they had it right there in the palm of their hands.

What do we hold the palm in our hands?

I don't know about you, but this gives me tremendous hope. Even though in these days of staying at home when we might feel helpless.

To know that I'm part of what God is doing in the world, you are part of what God is doing, and we are part of what God is doing in the world.

Friends, we have it right in the palms of our hands. What are we going to do with it?

Benediction

It's looking like we will continue to worship this way for some time. Invite friends.

Hope you feel like you're part of something special here.

