

This message was delivered by Elder Mary Bielen to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on Sunday, April 14, in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

118:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

118:2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

118:25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

118:26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

118:27 The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

118:28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

118:29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40

19:28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

19:29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,

19:30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

19:31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

19:32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

19:33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

19:34 They said, "The Lord needs it."

19:35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

19:36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

19:37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,

19:38 saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

19:39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

19:40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Luke 19:28-40: Come to the Parade!

Here we are at the sixth Sunday of the Lenten season. Lent is often described as an inward journey, as well as an outward one. The inward part is about renewing our personal relationship *with God*—moving closer to God with our hearts, our souls and our might. The outward part of Lent is about strengthening our relationships *with others*—our families, friends and neighbors.

This Lent, I decided to read a collection of Lenten practices. They were written in the past by people in a seminary community. Each day I would read one entry. Some of the entries focused on peoples' inward journeys. For example, one woman writes about starting her day with a 10 minute ritual of prayer, silence and listening for God, instead of writing her daily to-do list. Another entry describes a man sitting still for a time, and focusing on a different photograph each morning.

Other entries were about the outward journeys of people. One mother describes how her family had a 40-day fast from negative thinking to observe Lent. A father communicates how his family, one with young children, decided to work together on a rather involved Lego project for their Lenten practice. Each story was unique.

What dawned on me, though, while reading these accounts was how Lent invites us to participate in what Jesus speaks about so much—the kingdom of God. So much of this kingdom is about relationships—with God, with humanity, and with all of creation. This kingdom has been unfolding through history, and it is present here and now. Part of it is all of you out there in the pews. And this kingdom is yet to come....love, joy, peace... on earth as it is in heaven. This has been proclaimed throughout the history of Christianity. And although we can't see the whole picture now, we do catch glimpses of it. And in the Lenten season, God calls out to us and draws us anew into this kingdom—into a deeper relationship with the Divine and with the people in each of our lives.

This Lent I also joined in on your Thursday evening Lenten Prayer Services. I came. I listened to calming, yet inspiring music. I focused on the artwork on the bulletin cover each week. I became absorbed in the décor of the sanctuary—the candles, the stones, and the burlap. All of this somehow centered me and calmed me. Through the prayer and the pastoral reflection offered, I was drawn into thoughts about God and the relationships in my life. At times there were pauses of silence that brought to mind how busy and hectic life can be. Each time, I left with a renewed spirit and a sense of being connected to others, to this world and its Creator. The peace and stillness of each service just seemed to offer a glimpse of the kingdom—“the peaceable kingdom” as we sometimes say. It called to me. It invited me. Come and see. Taste. Take part.

In our gospel reading today, I think something similar is happening. Similar to what Lent offers us. This narrative is about—well—a parade. And through this story we are being invited, in spirit, to come to the parade, to join in, to play a part, to get involved, to connect, to share, to partake of this kingdom that Jesus is offering us—to wave palm branches. It is a rather spontaneous parade, one that comes into being without any planning—seemingly on its very own. It's not like most modern day parades that are planned out ahead of time—you know, where you need a permit and a committee coordinates the event. In parades today, if you're not in it, you can grab your lawn chairs and try to find a good spot to watch it. Either way you get to participate.

Probably the most contemporary example we have of a spur-of-the-moment gathering, like Jesus' parade, would be what is called a "flash mob." I've never been to a flash mob, but the way I understand it works is something like this: Someone has an idea for a gathering. They plan to have it at a specific location. Then they communicate the time and place and nature of the event. They do this through Twitter and Instagram and other social media. Then lots of people start showing up at the location—to dance, to sing, to protest, or whatever is planned. Who knows? Maybe this could be a new way of being a church.

I can remember some spontaneous events like this when I was a young girl. I grew up very close to the Atlantic Ocean and every few years, a whale would wash up on the beach. It's called "beaching." There's a variety of reasons for this happening. The whale may be sick or injured, or dying. Or it may accidentally swim into shallow water, and not be able to make its way back to deeper water. Well, when a whale would "beach" like this, the word would travel fast throughout the town. Before you know it, lots of people would head to the beach to see the whale—like a parade. Only these were not happy events like most parades because usually—it was too late for the whale. Just the same, it illustrates how people want to be part of what's happening—to join in—to offer help and support and be in solidarity with others—even whales! It's the way we have been created.

This seems to be the case with the parade in our gospel reading. Jesus is determined to proceed with the parade whatever happens. And he is surrounded by disciples supporting his cause. They get the colt and prepare it for him. Others begin to lay down their cloaks in the road in a show of honor. In John's gospel, the people lay down branches of palm trees; in Matthew, the people spread branches from the trees; in Mark, they spread leafy branches. In Luke's Gospel, however, there is no mention of palm branches. Instead the people lay down their cloaks. But all are gestures of honor.

The whole multitude of disciples are gathered and call out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." They are calling out for God's peace to be poured out on earth—to challenge and change the worldly kingdom they now live in. Unfortunately, the Pharisees are close by the disciples and hear them. They order Jesus to stop his disciples. They want to put an end to the parade, the cheers, to the kingdom being preached, all of it! They choose not to participate in the celebration and they want to break it up and have everybody go home.

But Jesus will have no part of the Pharisees, and what they are demanding. Perhaps here's where we might imagine Jesus stopping and singing a stanza or two from the song, "Don't Rain on My Parade"—Here's a few lyrics from the song: "I simply have to march, my heart's a drummer! Don't bring around a cloud to rain on my parade!"

Jesus is more polite than me. He simply tells them that if the disciples weren't shouting the stones would! I find it so interesting in this story and throughout the Word of God, how nature is included, although it's easy to overlook it. Think about it. This story takes place near an olive grove—the Mount of Olives. Then there's the colt. And cloaks—likely made from some natural material like wool or cotton. Let heaven *and nature* sing! Even the stones are part of the story. We don't typically give stones much thought or notice. Yet, in this narrative they are assigned an important role. They have the last word: Even the stones will shout.

Today is a joyful day. It has a special name—Palm Sunday- the day that the church commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It speaks of the promise of love, and joy, and peace. Yet we know the peace being sought –and the peace being offered–will come at a great cost. And we will journey through this in the events of the week before us. The story continues and our journey continues.

So I'll end this message with some wondering questions. They are the same ones that I used with the children this morning.

I wonder what part of the message you like best?

I wonder what part is the most important?

I wonder what part is about you?

I wonder if we left out part of the message, would we still have all the message that we need?