

ALWAYS REFORMING

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 21:1-11

What is it like to lose your place of worship? To be denied the opportunity to gather with those who share your faith? To be unable to lift your voices as a congregation together praising God? What is it like to be under the continual threat of a malevolent force controlling your life? If you don't know the answers to these questions, then you should study the story of the Jews during the period known as the Exile.

In the year 605 BC, the mighty Babylonian Empire attacked the small nation of Judah. By this point in history, the land of the Jews had divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. Israel—the northern kingdom—had fallen to the Assyrians 125 years earlier.

In 605 BC, the Babylonian army marched westward and laid siege to Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom. In what would be the first of three waves of deportations, the Babylonians transported many from the upper echelon of Judean society back to Babylon in order both to weaken Judah and to staff their growing empire.

Eight years later, following a revolt by the Judaeans, the Babylonians again attacked and deported a second wave back to Babylon. Six years after that, in response to another uprising, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, leveling the city walls, burning the gates, and, worst of all, destroyed the centerpiece of Jewish worship—the 400-year-old temple built by King Solomon. In addition to the destruction of the city, a third and final wave of citizens was forcibly removed back to Babylon.

For these Jewish exiles in Babylon, by most accounts, life was not horrendous. The Babylonians adopted a live-and-let-live policy. The Jews were allowed to reside together in communities. They married and had children. Many worked in the administration. Others farmed and started businesses. Some even became wealthy.

But no matter how comfortable they may have been, the reality was that they had been forcibly removed from their homes and their land. Their people had been crushed. They were but a remnant. Would they ever be set free? Would they ever see Jerusalem again? On top of that was the matter of faith—the question of God. For the Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was God's throne on earth. The temple was the hub of their worship. The temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians, so, if the temple didn't exist, then was God still with them? Were they alone and forgotten in their captivity? We can feel their anguish in Psalm 117 where we read,

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion (Psalm 137).

Today is Palm Sunday. For 2000 years, the church has used this day to recall the event of Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem. We call it the Triumphal Entry. The occasion for this event was the feast of the Passover. Like thousands of other pilgrims, Jesus and his followers converged on the holy city to observe this feast.

Traveling to Jerusalem, when Jesus' entourage came to a village on the outskirts of the city, Jesus dispatched two of his disciples to go into the village to acquire a donkey. They do so and bring the animal back to Jesus. Jesus then rides that animal into Jerusalem. His action is a reflection of the ancient words of Zechariah which say, *Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.*

On that day, Jesus and his followers are only a small subset of the massive crush of people streaming into Jerusalem. They merge with the parade of pilgrims. Those around Jesus see him on the donkey and recognize what it represents. They make the connection between the man on the animal and the image of the prophesied king entering the city. In response, the crowd around Jesus shouts out the words from Psalm 118 saying, *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven.* And as one does for a king, the people cut branches and lay them on the road like a green carpet. The actions of these pilgrims create a stir that ripples through the city with people asking, Who is this? Is this a new king? Is he the one who will overthrow the Romans and free our land? The answer they get is, *He is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*

On a normal Palm Sunday, we would mark the day with the choir and children processing into the sanctuary waving palm branches. But that day is not today. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic threatening our world, our nation, and our community, we have chosen to stay apart, in our homes, attempting to limit the spread of the virus. That is how it must be.

Although I miss being with you all, I am grateful for this technology that allows us to share our time together.

The presence of the coronavirus is frightening. Like the Jews in Exile, there are many unknowns. How long will this last? Will life return to normal? Will I get sick? Will anyone I know fall ill? Is God still with us?

Setting our fears aside, Palm Sunday is an occasion for joy. We rejoice that Jesus is our king. But we also know the story doesn't end with this Triumphal Entry. Jesus enters Jerusalem and is quickly betrayed and arrested. Because of the corruption, greed, and desire for power of the authorities, Jesus is placed on trial for

sedition. He sentenced to be executed by crucifixion. In just a few short days, everything has changed. The people's promise of hope has been brutally stamped out.

But the story does not end there. Jesus' crucified body is placed in a tomb and three days later he is resurrected. God's ancient covenant—the covenant first made with Abraham—the promise to be with us always—is fulfilled.

Next week, on Easter, we will gather here again to celebrate God's power over darkness, sin, and death. Salvation did not die on that cross. Salvation lives.

The exiled Jews in Babylon certainly suffered and lost much. But the experience also changed them. In time, they came to realize that God had never left them. They learned to worship together without a temple. They developed assemblies or 'synagogues' for worship and education. They created the role of scribes—experts who studied, taught, and preserved the scriptures for the people. Through the loss of their land and the destruction of their temple, the people learned new ways to worship God, to be faithful.

From the very beginning, the story of our faith has been a story of change. Our God is a living god, always revealing new ways for us to be in relationship with him. God is never closed to us. As our circumstances change, we discover that God comes to us in new and creative ways.

In the 1500s, the newly emerging Protestant church adopted the Latin motto *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* which means “The church reformed, always reforming.” The reformers felt that the old church had become stagnant and corrupt, the church stood in the way of people growing closer to God. The reformers sought new ways to be in relationship with God.

Jesus was doing the same thing when he rode that donkey into Jerusalem. He was announcing that he was a new king, a different king, a king of peace and humility. He was not the god-king of Rome, but the prince of peace. Jesus came to show us a new way to live with our God.

It is my prayer that in this time of COVID-19, when we are practicing social distancing, that we will exercise our own creativity and explore new ways to worship and become closer to God and to one another.

Just a month ago, if you had asked me if virtual communion was possible, I probably would have said no. Communion is about the community gathered at the table sharing the bread and the cup as one body—the body of Christ.

But what a difference a month makes. This week, as I pondered and prayed, I decided that in these extraordinary circumstances where we are unable to gather around the physical table, if our intentions are pure, then we can celebrate this

sacrament virtually. It was reassuring when the Presbyterian church sent out a letter on Wednesday saying the same thing. As the letter concluded, “We are walking this unknown road together. Sometimes we stumble, but with God’s help, we will never fall.”

In tumultuous times, the church needs to be an anchor, but that does not mean the church can’t reform and change. We are always reforming because our world is always changing. Our confidence comes from our God who gives us hope.

When we are back and worshiping together under one roof, I believe this sacrament of Communion will take on new meaning. We always talk about how all the body of Christ is present at the table—all believers in all time and space. A month ago, those may have been just words. Now, I think we understand. Amen.