PALM SUNDAY/PASSION SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

April 2, 2023

*Mirror, Mirror* Matthew 21:1-11

Matthew 27:11-14, 24, 27-52

Some of us have been reading a book together during Lent. It is called, *Witness at the Cross,* written by Prof. Amy Jill Levine.

As the title suggests, each of the chapters focuses on one particular group of people who were present when Christ carried his cross through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha, the place where he was crucified. Levine guides us through the account of Jesus’ crucifixion as it is told in each of the four gospels. She prompts us to bring our curiosity and questions as we spend time with the “witnesses” who were present on that holy and difficult day.  She asks: who were they?  Why were they included in the story, and what can we learn from them?  How does their experience make a difference to our experience today?

For the most part, Prof. Levine asks these questions of Jesus’ supporters—his disciples—we study their reaction to Jesus’ ordeal. However, in the first chapter, the group that she highlights are the bystanders. The following chapters concentrate on the groups of people who have been following and supporting him, the ones who had come to know and care about him and what he had to say about God, but among these were also the onlookers, the rubberneckers, the people who may have just been passing by that day and got caught-up in the crowd and the emotions of it.

Of all of the people portrayed in Levine’s book, that first group is, I believe, the most important because it is in that group we are most likely to find ourselves—and this is the most important experience we can have at Easter—we can, and should, find our own place in the story of Christ.

And so, we notice that the people who followed Jesus on that first Palm Sunday were a mixture of supporters as well as the unaware—people who had perhaps come out to do an errand, or a little shopping. These are the the ordinary people, the bystanders whom Matthew tells us (in verse ten), were *“in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’*

Did they ask more about him beyond that moment of curiosity, because that is the point. That will have a bearing on what else may happen in their lives during that week, and for the rest of their lives, just as it does for us.

Answering that question for ourselves will determine where we will be in other crowds of people who come out to see what is happening with Jesus. Indeed, at the end of the week, on Good Friday—once again, we must also allow the Bible to show us where we are when Jesus walks the *Via Della Rosa*—the way of sorrow.

Will we be one of the bystanders for whom this spectacle of Roman punishment and cruelty was just a part of the landscape? The ones who know the harsh realities of life—especially life under Roman occupation—and see this as “business as usual,” just another criminal on his way to his death?

It is at this point that our similarity to the bystanders ends because we have the advantage of history. We know the rest of this story, as well all of what has come before this dark moment in the history of mankind.

And so wherever we are in the crowds of Palm Sunday *and* Passion Sunday, we acknowledge that we are the ones who know who Jesus is. Indeed, we profess to know Jesus as our Savior, and so, for us, this passage from Matthew of the people who greet Jesus becomes a mirror held up to our own lives. It asks us to see where we are in this crowd that shouted *“Hosanna.”* Are we right there with him in the open? Or are we hanging back, unsure if we want to publicly profess our faith?

At the end of the week—just a scant few days—a crowd will again gather around as Jesus carries his cross to be crucified. Again, the Bible holds up a mirror and asks us to find ourselves in that crowd, too, just as the old hymn asks, *Were You There?*

It is also at this point we must acknowledge the many times we have seen someone like Simon of Cyrene who was conscripted to carry Jesus’ cross when it became too heavy for him. That is to say: how many times have we *been* Simon, how many times we have stepped-up to help carry the heavy burdens of others—the burdens that others are too tired, or too broken to carry on their own. Jesus’ love *and* his struggle to the cross, and his suffering, are also lessons we are meant to learn and keep in our hearts.

Some of you may remember about what happened in First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas back in November of 2017. A gunman armed with a Ruger AR-556 rifle walked into the church and proceeded to shoot and kill more than two dozen people at worship. He later took his own life, too.

You are to be forgiven if you do not remember this specific mass shooting. There have been so many others since. At any rate, it has been six years since that particular tragedy, but the effects of it linger and many of them are still catastrophic.

The sad part that we, who have not had this experience may not realize, is that the pain the survivors experienced—physical as well as emotional—does not stop after the shooting is over. It does not stop even six years after all of the funerals. For many of the survivors in Sutherland Springs, the pain and suffering continues to this day, and will for the rest of their lives.

Part of the pain has been that many of the people in Sutherland Springs feel forgotten. Apparently, for many of them, the fact that little has changed in the way in which we—as a country—deal with gun violence, makes their tragedy and the tragedy of so many others feel like their pain and suffering has had no meaning, like it was just another episode of violence perpetrated on the bodies and lives of unimportant, faceless people—like Jesus, who for some was (and is) just one more criminal who was crucified.

That is what he would have been if his disciples and even many other people who saw him for the first time that day had not been able to see the love of God as he carried and offered it to the world. Because they would not let his life, his death, and the Resurrection of God’s Love be swept away, hidden, or forgotten, we have the story, we have the Gospels. We have this story of the survival of love. We have this love in our own lives.

We also have the opportunity almost every day to also see the importance of Jesus’ suffering and pain in the lives of others, and to respond to that suffering with a change of heart and mind about the causes of violence and destruction in our lives and the lives of others.

Jesus’ suffering becomes a mirror that we hold up so that we may see the way in which others suffer also. We hold up the mirror to his love so that we may see the way forward, the new ways in which we are being called to respond to others’ pain and on-going suffering.

For those of you wondering why I brought up the specific story about First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs: it is because two of the reporters who covered the story back in 2017 have gone back to Sutherland Springs.

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, many of the reporters who covered the story were in Sutherland Springs for quite a while. As part of their job, they spoke to many people—often people who had lost multiple family members, even direct eye witnesses who had been in the church but had escaped injury or death. Many of the reporters also spoke to the injured as they lay in their hospital beds.

Despite the multitude of reporters who covered the tragedy, only two have returned to write another story about the survivors—Silvia Foster-Frau, and Holly Bailey of the Washington Post. They said it was because it had become more than a story. They had become part of the town’s and several of the individuals’ lives. The place and the incident had become more than a story to cover. They had been people with names and identities, people they cared about.

They had had a mirror held up to them showing tragedy. These two women also saw the people who were suffering, and they did not simply move on and forget.

Neither does God. Palm Sunday and the whole of Holy Week culminates in the joy of Easter. However, getting to Easter is more than moving from joy to sorrow to joy. Starting with the events of Palm Sunday, we are meant to see through the joy and elation as though through a looking glass—a mirror. We are also to see Christ’s suffering in that same mirror. We are to see his and others’ suffering, and even our own.

We are meant to see our own faces and where we are among all of the others who are made in God’s image. And we are meant to keep ours and their faces in sight—always in sight—so that we may keep the love of God in sight too. So that we may gladly respond to that love from above with love that reaches out, that sees, and responds.

As we make our way through Holy Week to Easter Sunday, I pray we will be witnesses to the cross in our own way, our own context. Let us be glad to witness Jesus coming toward us amid joy and celebration. Let us be faithful in bearing witness to his suffering…and his love, that we may have this in our own lives, and so that this may be reflected in our lives and toward the world and the people God loves so much.

Let this be so. Amen.