Today is, to be quite honest, an unusual day. It is unusual because this is yet another Sunday that we are not physically gathered together in this space, rather a scattered community gathered together virtually. I am quite grateful, I should say, that we are still able to join together in this way, even if it is not our preference. Along those same lines, today is unusual because it is Palm Sunday and we are without our normal parade of palms that find their way to the front of the Sanctuary, littering the chancel, little symbols of celebration and hope. We do instead, however, have the lovely video that Candy McComb and so many worked to put together in honor of this joyous day. So, thank you to all who helped make that beautiful moment happen. But it is actually this very celebration that we gather for each year that makes this last Sunday in Lent so unusual, even under the most normal of global and community circumstances.

By tradition, this Sunday is both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. This is the first day of Holy Week. There’s a powerful dissonance on this Sunday – clashing moods and different sentiments that speak to the very complexity and challenge of this seemingly triumphant day. On the one hand, this is a celebration of Jesus’ arrival into the city of Jerusalem, his arrival as a new king of a different kind, come to save the people. But, on the other hand, the festival frenzy of waving palms, the marvelous chaos of Jesus entering Jerusalem in a parade, soon gives way to betrayal, anguish, abandonment, suffering and death. Those who shout "Hosanna" will soon cry, "Crucify Him!"

This is the challenging juxtaposition that occurs on this final Sunday in Lent. It is a time of both celebration and grief. It is, as Amy Jill Levine describes, the beginning of “a story of tragedy and triumph that should inspire, provoke, and challenge.” To the disciples on that day, who walked with Jesus into the unknown, literally toward his death, it must have seemed like the beginning of the end. I doubt they were among those waving palms and offering shouts of celebration. Thankfully, we know how the story ends. We know that at the end of all of this there is indeed cause for celebration once again. But there is waiting to be done. This is still Lent, after all. Easter is coming. The days that lead up to that morning of joy and hope and promise are days filled with uncertainty, anxiety, doubt and fear.
This morning we have read from two different portions of Matthew’s telling of the Holy Week saga. The first tells of Jesus’ movement into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus is aware of what lies ahead. He has been telling his disciples about it for days now. Yet, he enters the city anyway knowing the purpose of what is to come. As he does, the word, “Hosanna,” is shouted from the crowds gathered, again and again. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“Hosanna” is a Hebrew term that means, literally, “save, please” or in more formal terms, “Save, we pray.” It is a reference to Psalm 118, one of the Hallel Psalms that pilgrims would sing as they came to Jerusalem and Jews would recite on the Passover holiday. That Psalm, and this shout of “hosanna” is both an exclamation of praise and also a cry for help. “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!”

It is said that one of the constant characters in Jesus’ life and even at his death is “the crowd.” Those who watch Jesus, follow Jesus, listen to Jesus, cheer for him, boo at him, and ask for help from him. We, even now, are among that crowd. We join the shouts of “hosanna” so that we might be saved – saved from without (from poverty, oppression, violence, and illness) and saved from within (from sin, self-delusion, jealousy, greed, fear.) Today, and for the past few weeks, most of us are shouting “Hosanna!” because our world is being ravaged by a virus that, most of the time, seems beyond anyone’s control. We cry “Hosanna!” for ourselves, for our children, for our friends and family, for strangers even, as we sit at home waiting. Waiting for an answer, waiting for healing, waiting for this moment in time to be past us.

I’ll be honest. I’ve reflected a lot lately on the list of questions that loom in the waiting. When will all this end? When will we know when we can start moving forward again? When it is all over, what comes next? What will be different when it’s all over? What will be better? What will be worse? The waiting is hard. As I’ve sat and pondered this, some days with hope and some days with grief, I’ve considered what it must have been like for Jesus’ followers in those days leading up to Jerusalem, and in those final days with him. What must it have been like to enter the unknown with Jesus, trying their best to maintain faith and trust and hope amidst the waiting?

We’ve heard this morning already a passage of scripture from within this passion story that illustrates the very real challenge of following Christ in the face of fear, chaos or crises. What we see in the moments of Peter’s denial are perhaps what makes Peter relatable to
us. Peter doubts. Peter turns to fear and turns away from Christ, because he is only human after all and he doesn’t really know what to do. He’s worried. He’s scared. Peter’s movement in this moment of crises, unfortunately, is a move away from Christ rather than toward him.

One writer puts it this way: “As bad as Peter seems at this moment, he serves as an inspiration to believers with their own moments of doubt, denial, and desperation. For we know that Peter recovered and reoriented his life to preaching about the one whom he has sadly denied. ...This negative moment could paradoxically serve as a positive encouragement to stand fast in the face of fear and not to deny Christ.”

This moment of doubt and denial of Peter reminds us that even when chaos enters the story and we feel ready to turn and move the other direction we must stand fast and cling to the One who is always moving towards us, bringing hope, and peace and promise.

This is the good news of Palm Sunday. This is the real reason for celebration: Jesus is on the move and he is moving toward us. By entering the city and moving towards the cross, Jesus is moving toward us. Even in the moments when we’re left waiting and wondering, Jesus is always moving toward us.

So, we wait. Even when waiting is hard. Even when we’re worried or scared. We wait in the liminal space between Palm Sunday and Easter, because the hope of Easter is worth it. We wait in these final days of Lent. We wait for our current crisis to be over and continue to cry out “hosanna,” trusting that Christ is, has and always will be moving in our direction. In Hebrew, the verbs “wait,” and “hope” can be rendered by the same word. In this time of sickness and social distancing, let’s pray for our waiting to be enriched by hope.

One of the ways I have found hope in these wearisome weeks, is in the window messages that have popped up throughout our neighborhood. You may have seen some in your neighborhoods, or online as there are examples of this form of “hope-spreading” from all over the world. But right here in this neighborhood, several houses have adorned their windows with messages of hope and encouragement, most of them appearing to be created, at least in part, by children.

“Everything will be ok,” one window says. “We can do hard things,” says another. One of my favorites has a rainbow painted across it and written around the rainbow: “God keeps His promises.” God’s promise never to leave or forsake us is one we need to remember especially right now. These
window walks are like a little Palm Sunday parade, pointing me toward the hope of Easter, the hope of Christ turned toward me and all of us.

There are lots of places to look for pain and misery right now; there are also incredible displays of hope. For instance... Have you seen some of the beautiful ways people are showing their appreciation to healthcare workers and those on the front lines of this pandemic? If you haven’t yet also seen online the video of 30 studio singers from Nashville singing together, *It Is Well With My Soul*, all via cellphone from their individual homes, then I’d suggest you do that soon. There is hope to be found and people are spreading it. There is hope to be found because God is with us and will not forsake us. There is hope because Easter is coming. In times like these, we are reminded that our hope and trust in God should not be based on our current circumstances but on who God is and where God is.

This week, our devotional study from Ken Wilson’s book on the Sarum Prayer comes to an end. We have been praying together during Lent this ancient prayer, praying for God to *be* in us. The work of Lent, after all, is about our need to create space in our lives for God to be in every part of who we are and every part of what we do, and so we continue to pray, God *be* in us.

But, during life’s difficult days, when the temptation grows within us to move away from one another and away from Christ, let us remember that the hope and promise of Holy Week is that God, who created us in the beginning, is already with us because God’s only begotten Son has and continues to move toward us, and, through Christ, God has made a home within each of us. Whatever we face, we do not face it alone—God is with us. But even more astounding, God is *within* us. Let us dwell for a moment, finding hope and assurance in God’s life-giving presence in us now: in our heads, in our eyes, in our mouths, in our hearts, in our beginning, our end, and in every moment in between.

Holy Week is upon us and, as one pastor said this week, “never more have we needed a God who is intimately acquainted with human suffering.” Thankfully, we know how the story ends. We know that at the end of all of this, there is cause for celebration. And we know, in our current circumstance, despite our waiting, there is hope to be found and there will be celebration once again.

For God is with us. God *is* in us. Hosanna! Amen.