

“Clutching Both Branches and Arrows”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Palm Sunday, March 24, 2013

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29 Luke 19: 28-40

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

A Song of Victory

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

2 Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,

that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

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

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

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

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

25 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

27 The Lord is God, and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

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

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

Luke 19: 29-40

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

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

29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 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. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ” ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 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, ³⁸ saying,

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Sermon

Clutching Both Branches and Arrows

He came from somewhere that is not called Earth,
arriving in a flash of light,
landing in a remote place,
taking on human form,
encountering people who were
isolated, alone and afraid,
healing some who were
hurt,
resurrecting an
innocent who died of violence,
befriending some
and being threatened
by others.

In the end he slipped away from Earth,
returning from whence he came,
leaving far too soon
yet making an lasting impact
on those whom he touched.

This is the plot and storyline of a 1984 film called “Starman”
with Jeff Bridges and Karen Allen.

The first time Starman got behind the wheel of a car
he was asked if he knew what he was doing.

He said that he had learned from observation.

When pressed for the rules of the road,

Starman said, *“Red light stop, green light go, yellow light go very fast.”*

Later in the film Starman was asked what he had observed about human behavior.

He said, *“You are a strange species. Not like any other.*

And you’d be surprised how many there are, intelligent but savage.

Shall I tell you what I find beautiful about you?

You are at your very best when things are worst.”

Listen for the Word of God (from Luke 19):

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

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, ³⁸

saying,

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him,

“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”

40 Jesus answered, *“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

My Bible subtitles this passage *“Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem”*

Yes, Jesus enters into Jerusalem and our lives with triumph,

and we are singing, singing for our lives, end of story!

If only this tale and our own faith walk could always stay on an up note,

frozen in time while leaping up in the air, like the Toyota commercials of old.

His entry into Jerusalem is like one of those mountain-top experiences

that so many modern tales like to end on.

Frodo tosses the Ring into Mt. Doom and liberates Middle Earth, end of story.

Medical Examiner Kay Scarpetta solves the case, end of story.

Percy Jackson and fellow demigods save the Olympians, end of story.

Harry Potter and friends defeat Voldermort, end of story.

However, my Bible and yours remind us this moment of triumph

is an introduction to a week of trauma and temptation, tribulation and tragedy

before dawn breaks on Easter morning.

Within hours of the same week after Jesus entered into Jerusalem,

a follower of Jesus would betray him.

Within hours after the betrayal,

a follower of Jesus would cut off the ear of an arresting officer.

Within hours after the arrest,

a crowd that included followers of Jesus would turn on Him

and yell, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Within hours after the conviction by acclamation,

Jesus was crucified by fellow human beings

who hammered nails into his hands and feet

and left him outside to die.

How quickly we turn from welcoming souls into an angry mob,

from friends into betrayers,

from advocates for peace into practitioners of violence.

What happened?

Did someone flip a switch?

Does this display of the extremes of human behavior

shock us, sadden us, disgust us, shame us...

or are we so calloused, so immune, so numb, so desensitized

that we take it for granted?

By “it” we speak together of our tendency to clutch at both branches and arrows.

One of the symbols of our nation is the American eagle,

proud and regal in profile,

clutching both branches and arrows in his talons,

reminding us of our collective responsibility

to make straight the ways of peace and liberty

while also defending and protecting the rights
of all people.

There is a sense of balance here with our American eagle.

The eagle's display of branches and arrows is not an
either/or but a both/and.

We're invited to

both love one another in community, hold each other
up,

seek out peaceful resolutions and alternatives to
violence,

and if and when the time comes to put arrows in a bow

we shall do what is necessary to protect one
another and the rights of all.

That is the ideal, the dream, the vision.

Do you think we as a people, as a nation, as a global village

give equal weight to our handful of branches of peace

and our handful of weapons for self-defense
and protection?

Do we give one handful more attention, more energy, more
passion than the other?

Maybe "might makes right" gets more airplay in a society
that glorifies violence

because we don't have a clue what to do with "blessed

are the peacemakers”.

Is this what Jesus Christ encountered in Jerusalem?

Is this what the principalities and powers thought and felt,

that Jesus was a threat because he spoke of *shalom* and prayed for reconciliation?

Is the fear of being threatened by the untamed, uncontrollable Spirit of God

who might very well upend your life and expectations

all it takes to turn a group of followers empowered to be servants

into an angry mob intent on their own self-interests?

Recently the Newtown, Connecticut father of a child spoke before Congress.

The father's son was murdered in his classroom just before Christmas

by a man with an assault weapon, body armor, and a disturbed mind.

The father simply told his story.

He shared his pain and brokenness.

He petitioned the principalities and powers.

He asked for our elected officials to do what they have in their power to do:

please, for the sake of our children and the innocents,
work together to address violence in America
and its myriad causes and effects.

If only as a beginning, please consider positive ways
to limit our way-too-easy access to assault weapons.

If one child like his own could be saved,

if one father like himself could be spared the grief and
loss and heartache,

if one life could be spared by legislation and
follow through

to make it that much more difficult, if not
impossible,

for criminals and mentally ill
people

to obtain weapons of mass
destruction,

then his plea for legislative action
would not be in vain.

As he departed from the halls of Congress,

he was heckled.

A large crowd of fellow Americans, neighbors in citizenship,
gathered outside the halls of Congress

and screamed at him, jeering and calling him

everything but a child of God.

If you watched it on television and listened very closely,

you could almost hear them say, “Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Our city streets, schools, shopping centers, nation and global village

are buckling under the crippling weight of senseless violence.

What does it take for us as the whole people of God

to seek and create practical solutions for the sake of common sense

and building a safer and just community?

You know, when our loss is personal,

whether we lose a child to violence, or a brother or sister or a dearly beloved,

suddenly all these arguments on why we can't find a just solution

don't seem as important as the soul that is lost.

Thanks to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and our lives,

we have this hope that we can make a world of difference.

We can start with ourselves.

We can start by turning away from the ways of hate and harming each other

and toward the ways of teaching and practicing *shalom*,

the wholeness God intends for us all.

If we are silent,

if we do not sing out for the sake of the innocents and the victims,

if we do not speak up and out

for truth and love and stopping senseless violence,

then, as Jesus said, the very stones will shout out.

They will cry out for justice.

They will cry out for mercy, for a sense of enough.

They will cry out that there are already too many angels,

that what God needs is more hands here on earth for the harvest of souls

and people passionate for making God's love real.

The Good News is that we know how the story ends.

The Good News is that we are at our very best when things seem worst.

The Good News is that we have this hope.

“May we run out of time before we run out of hope.”[\[1\]](#)

Beth Zemsky of Minneapolis is an activist

for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights.

She shared on National Public Radio this past Tuesday a part of her life experience.

At StoryCorps Atlanta,[\[2\]](#)

Beth told fellow activist Kierra Johnson about an experience

that deeply affected her back in 1987

at the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Beth Zemsky had hoped her twin brother Bob

would join her at the March on Washington,

but he called at the last minute and said that he had a high fever,

that he had come down with the flu.

In her body she knew, she knew that he did not have the flu,

that he might be HIV positive and have AIDS.

That day was very cold in Washington, DC.

She and thousands of others were in the Metro Station
waiting for their trains to arrive.

Beth looked up and saw above them on an upper level a row
of policemen

wearing thick gloves and holding long batons,

repeatedly beating the batons against their
hands, making a steady beat.

Beth looked beside her and saw a young man sitting on a
bench

who was very cold

despite being wrapped in a blanket and held
closely by a friend.

She noticed how thin he was, and worried that he might not
have long to live.

The young man started singing a Holly Near song:

*“We are a gentle, loving people,
and we are singing, singing for our lives.”*[\[3\]](#)

It got very quiet except for his voice.

The police stopped banging their batons.

Soon people began to join in the song,

and soon the whole platform of travelers were singing
in one voice:

We are a gentle, angry people,

*and we are singing, singing for
our lives*

We are a justice seeking people,

*and we are singing, singing for
our lives*

We are young and old together,

*and we are singing, singing for
our lives We are gay and straight together,*

*and we are singing, singing for
our lives*

We are a gentle, loving people,

*and we are singing, singing for
our lives*

A train arrived at the station,

and people boarded the train still singing, still singing
for their lives.

Beth Zemsky's brother Bob passed away soon afterward.

She said, "*Now I am half a twin.*"

*When I get really discouraged or despairing, I think about
that moment,*

*about what it is like to be a community who loves
each other,*

and who hold each other up when we are most

desperate and dying.

That is the moment that is most inspiring to me.”

This is what comes from Jesus entering into Jerusalem and our lives with triumph,

and we are singing, singing for our lives.

We have this audacity of hope that maybe we can make a world of difference.

Maybe we can't, but we know we're at our best when things are at their worst.

Maybe we have to start where we are, right here and now.

And maybe, just maybe, we can start by practicing what it is like

to be a community who loves each other,

who hold each other up.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[1] *Rev. Patricia Case, March 23, 2013.*

[2] *StoryCorps Atlanta is in partnership with the Atlanta History Center. Beth Zemsky's story was recorded at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference.*

[3] “We Are A Gentle, Angry People” by Holly Near