



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Palm and Passion  
Palm Sunday, Year A  
Sunday, April 5, 2020  
The Rev. Amber Carswell

In October 2010, the historic chapel at Virginia Theological Seminary burnt to the ground. When I visited there for the first time six months later as a prospective student, the smell of fire and ash still lingered by the husk of the building. I probably don't need to tell you how monumental this loss was, how beloved the chapel was. The building was about 40 years younger than the nave here in Calvary, so you can extrapolate your feelings there if you have them. But its loss wasn't just one congregation: this chapel was the symbolic and practical center of formation for thousands of priests for over a hundred and thirty years.

A chapel in a seminary: it's the place where you learn your life's work of leading a community in worship. It's where the word is proclaimed, and a couple of times, it's where that word lands in your heart in such a way that you remember it for a lifetime. It's where you say the daily office, it's the place that's unlocked at night for anyone who needs the stillness they can't find inside or the space to wrestle with God. It is a place, to paraphrase TS Eliot, that has known prayer.

While trying to relate to you the importance of this chapel to the community, I'm doing this with an entirely different chapel in my mind. Because my class never saw the burnt chapel. We never saw the new chapel built at VTS, completed the year after we left.

We were the class without a chapel. The generation who only knew the wilderness, as Exodus might have it. But that's not entirely true.

We were the class of the Lettie Pate Evans Chapel, an auditorium on the lower floor of the academic building that was renovated for use as a chapel. The upper classmen hated it, of course. But when *I* think of holy and formative spaces in my life, that renovated auditorium is near the top.

Think of a plain and spacious white-walled room. Slate tile floor, rows of simple chairs of light wood that matched the altar and the cross, an entire eastern wall of clear glass windows that blazed in the sunrise during certain holy moments of Morning Prayer. If you looked at the cross in the center of the room, just beyond it on the wall was a fire alarm, not the most aesthetically pleasing position, but it stayed there despite considerable student outcry (constant outcry being one of those characteristics of those living in the wilderness.) I liked it. Look at the cross and be reminded that it lasts and the fire doesn't. Look at the cross and remember that long before it was decorative jewelry, it was a symbol of the pain and sacrifice followers of Jesus would undergo. Remember that it is also through pain that God identifies with us.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day when we remember the pain of the cross right after we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We read Matthew 21, when Jesus arrives and begins purposefully re-enacting scripture to declare who he is — a king, of the line of David. The people rush out to meet him, holding palm branches and laying their coats on the ground, shouting the ancient words, "Hosanna!"

So we re-enact their re-enactment, just without the donkey or the colt, and this year, without the crowds. I have great grief over this interim separation. But this year, we might be emotionally closer to what was actually happening in that scene. When Jesus arrived, Matthew says, the whole city was in turmoil. Of course they are; life in its order of the Roman empire and religious authorities is turned upside down by the actions of Jesus. This isn't so much a Mardi Gras as a collective sense of chaos and uncertainty. Turmoil. Sounds familiar.

“Hosanna!” the people cry. This is not another word of praise like Hallelujah; they had a word for that, and it was Hallelujah. Hosanna literally means Save — a cry for help. Save us! the people cry. There's a sense of frantic joy mixed in, like the shipwrecked crew who spot a rescue helicopter — if only the helicopter would spot them. Hosanna. In April 2020, my Hosanna feels closer to true than it ever has, particularly when I am thinking of my family full of essential workers, and my many friends in the medical community, and the vulnerable and the elderly and alone. That's where my Hosanna has become true.

And what we know is that when Jesus enters the scene, things do not calm down and turn into sunshine and rainbows. The turmoil mounts throughout the week. Though we skipped ahead to the Passion, sit down this afternoon or throughout this week and follow Matthew's account of what happens after chapter 21. The dread escalates. And you know, I can feel it this year for Holy Week, the coming surge not one of political violence of upheaval, but of a deadly virus multiplying quietly among us. This is the story of Holy Week, and you should know that the anxiety and fear you're feeling didn't disappear on the first Palm Sunday, and it might not be now. That's okay. Jesus is still entering in triumph beyond any feelings you're able to will away at this point.

Though he has no easy answers. “The temple will be no more,” he says at one point, winning himself zero friends and admirers. And when he foretells the temple's destruction, it's where I start having visions of burnt chapels and the locked red doors of our churches. “Temple” means very little to me. Calvary means something quite dear, and I know it does to many of you, too.

I started with a story of an interim chapel because, while yes, I hear them say that it's people (after all) who make a church, it's also true that church makes people — it makes us the kind of people who, week after week, spend time in the pursuit of reconciliation and beauty and truth, not as a theoretical, individual exercise, but in real time with the real consequences we find in the company of others. The buildings may go away, but we always find ways of bringing them back, to the glory of God, and you're doing it now, in houses, over the phone, even in that inhuman invention of Zoom.

So as a person who has spent a good deal of time in an interim, I'm wondering what this displacement in the holiest week of our year has to teach us if we can let go long enough of the regret at what is missing.

Because what I trust is that if we, in the peculiarity of this moment, can identify with the dread and anxiety of this Holy Week, if I *feel* this week more than ever in my living memory, then this story becomes my story, your story, and that we will reach the other side of its well-worn arc. Not without pain, not without loss. But the one who conquered death will have been there with us the whole time; we find, as Abbot Chapman said, that in our darkest moments, we are being held so near God's heart that we cannot see his face. When Easter comes after the longest night, we'll come back changed.