

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, April 10, 2022
Sixth Sunday in Lent
Palm Sunday

“Christ: ‘The Transcendent within Every “Thing” in the Universe”

Christian Scripture: Luke 19:29-42

Last Sunday, we officially concluded our Lenten sermon series that journeyed us through Victoria Loorz’s book *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred*.¹ Yet, we are still in the midst of Lent, this being the Sixth Sunday of the season. In addition to Loorz’s book, Matt, Margo, and Roger have been the highlights of my Lenten journey. They helped me go where I have not yet gone before, in thought and in emotion. Many books include an ‘afterword’, ‘epilogue’, or ‘appendix’ after the last chapter. Today as we celebrate Palm Sunday, I now add an afterword to our Lenten sermon series. (In adding an afterword, I am also ensuring that we sell the last six books the church purchased on your behalf.)

Many of you are aware that I run almost daily. My runs are usually done to ‘get them in’. They are shoehorned into a schedule. They are smashed into a day. Sometimes they follow with a shower, sometimes not, depending on the time of

¹ Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

my next appointment. My runs must include 'exertion'. I must sweat; I must suffer – otherwise it is not a run. These objectives are my conscious, surface current', motivations for running. Yet, there are also powerful sub-currents that motivate my runs: emotional therapy, catharsis, prayer, perspective, wholeness, and peace. I am often swept away by the surface current, forgetful of and oblivious to the far more powerful and life-giving sub-currents of my runs.

This weekend, as part of my Lenten daily practice, I ran further-up the West River Trail than ever before, both physically and emotionally. And for once, yes, only once in four years, I also walked a great deal after my run. Far upstream, I descended off the trail and I sat by the full and fast flowing waters that vigorously pressed-up against, and even over the top of, the banks. Rather than the stillness of a garden, I heard the turmoil of opposing forces. Rather than peaceful silence of the woods, I heard the constant crashing of water on rock. I saw soil, branches, trees, and yes, ice (still!), broken-off and hurled down-stream. All of nature is not peaceful, hence the phrase 'natural disaster'. While the surface current of harmony brings solace, another sub-current of contradiction brings contestation.

In her book, *Church of the Wild*, Victoria insightfully explores the current of beauty and peace heard in the chirping birds and the sub-current of predation – of life and death – and understands that *through Christ* all is divinely connected.²

² Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 125.

As I contemplated the contrast between the forest's bucolic peace and the river's violent turmoil, I recalled my mother's favorite scripture verse "[...] in all *things* God works together for the good [...]" (Romans 8:28, NIV).³ To remind us of this scripture, I am going to ask that you attune yourself to the word '*things*'. Each time you hear the word '*things*', please raise and wave your palm branch.

As I re-read over and over again this week the Story of the Palms, I could not help discern that there are at least two currents running in our biblical narrative. At the beginning of our reading, the setting is the Mount of Olives, "named for the olive groves that once covered its slopes".⁴ On the Mount of Olives, we have a current of tranquil prayer and teaching. At the end of our reading, we have a sub-current of a furious Jesus sparring with Pharisees warning them that his silence will cause even the stones to "cry out" (Luke 19:40). In one current, Christ gently teaches in an organic grove, in another Christ cries-out through inanimate stones. "In all *things* God works together for the good".

The colt on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem also carries dual currents. On one hand, Jesus 'Triumphal Entry' depicts him riding through the gates, as would a king into a conquered city raised on a war-horse. The narrative suggests victory and domination. Yet, the subcurrent is not one of elevation, but of depreciation. A

³ Other ancient authorities read "'God makes all things work together for good', or 'in all things God works for good'".

⁴ "Mount of Olives", *Wikipedia*. Found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_of_Olives, accessed April 9, 2022.

colt is a young horse, adolescent, underdeveloped, and even petite. In fact, the colt had never before been ridden. The colt had not carried one warrior into battle and not one body had its hooves trampled. More depreciating, one gospel narrative has Jesus riding on a donkey, an ass. Is that not, well, darn-right humiliating? Yet, no matter, “In all *things* God works together for the good”.

Dual currents are everywhere in the Triumphant Entry. We hear in the various gospel narratives that two *things* are used to express “prestige, status, celebrity, ceremony, and a whole lot of pomp and circumstance”.⁵ Today, the ‘red carpet’ serves that function. In the absence of carpets, people in the ancient near east utilized palms and one’s own clothes, or cloaks, to express public deference. Palms seem to me to be the less expensive and less sacrificial option. (If fact, palms were not even mentioned in today’s reading from Luke’s gospel). To contaminate your clothes with dust, dirt, hooves, urine, and feces, well, that is quite an impressive sacrifice! Yet, finding the equivalent of leaves on the side of the road and spreading them around to make a path is a simple and inexpensive gesture. I hear two concurrent narratives with the lush olive groves and the cold stones, the war horse and the donkey, and the palms and the cloaks. I hear two simultaneous truths; neither is right, neither is wrong.

⁵ “How Did the Red Carpet Become the Iconic Runway for Awards Shows?”, *Dictionary.com*, April 23, 2021. Found at: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/red-carpet/>, accessed April 10, 2022.

I also hear two narratives about the crowd. In John, Jesus' Triumphant Entry is described by the Pharisees as "the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). However, in Luke's telling of the story, the crowd seems very diminished. As a historian, I actually suspect that the crowd was rather pathetic. I know from experience, that whether those gathered to support Trump and protest against Planned Parenthood or those gathered to support peace in Yemen and protest nuclear weapons can be made out by the media to seem like 'multitudes' rather than small bands of noisy faithful (only the camera angle need be changed). Just like at Jesus' birth, I suspect Jesus received a 'king's welcome' by only a precious few. Jesus context, from birth to death, was anything but 'royal'. No matter whether the crowd was large or small, "In all *things* God works together for the good".

Friends, the concurrent observations about peace and power from the Story of the Palms and my experiences contrasting the tranquility of a verdant forest and the pounding of a rushing river communicate to us that "Jesus has no need to claim victory over territory that has always been part of the Creator's creation. Jesus doesn't declare victory, he pronounces identity".⁶

⁶ Cheryl Lindsay, "Shout Out", in *Sermon Seeds*, United Church of Christ. Found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-shout-out/>, accessed April 9, 2022.

As I Christian, I unapologetically declare that Christ is in Jesus! Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Jesus communicates to us the identity of the Christ perfectly. Yet, so does the Mount of Olives. So does the West River. So does the colt. So does the palm branch. So does the small, even pathetic, band of faithful believers. So does the stone that cries out. So do all *things*. In all *things* God, through the Christ, works together for the good.

Friends, do not think that ‘all *things* are Christ’ is a new theology. Richard Rohr wrote: “*everything* visible, without exception, is the outpouring of God”. That Christ is *everything* is, at best, a sub-current that we have always known and, at worst, is a “forgotten reality”. I am beginning to realize it now. Rohr wrote about it. Jesus preached it. The prophets proclaimed it.

I believe that “Christ is a name for the transcendent within every ‘*thing*’ in the universe”.⁷ ‘Every *thing*’ includes the forest, the river, the palm branch, the colt, the stone, the faithful disciples, and all of the *things* in the Story of the Palms. And that is cause, as does the stone, for us “to shout out!”⁸ Halleluia!

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, “Amen!”

⁷ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 5.

⁸ Cheryl Lindsay, “Shout Out”, in *Sermon Seeds*, United Church of Christ. Found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-shout-out/>, accessed April 9, 2022.