

SERMON
PALM SUNDAY
April 14, 2019
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

On this day Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem in triumph, and was proclaimed King of kings by those who spread their garments and branches of palm along his way. Let these branches be for us signs of his victory, and grant that we who bear them in his name may ever hail him as our King, and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life. (Book of Common Prayer p. 271).

Oh! What a Beautiful City
Refrain: Oh! what a beautiful city, Oh! what a beautiful city
Oh! what a beautiful city,
Twelve gates-a to the city, Hallelujah!

- 1- There's three gates in-a the East,—three gates in-a the West; —
Three gates in-a the North, and three gates in-a the South,
making it twelve gates-a to the city, a Hallelujah.
- 2 - O, my Lord built-a that day— that was just a fore square; —
wanted all-a you sinners to meet Him in-a the air,
'cause He built twelve gates-a to the city, a-Hallelujah.

(Traditional Spiritual)

*Whether or not your life is a success or a failure,
depends on your purpose and goal.*

O, what a beautiful city! O, what a beautiful city! Jerusalem! The city on a hill. Where once King David established a capitol and reigned—uniting the northern and southern kingdoms. In the center of the city stands the Temple. Where the Ark of the Covenant rests. Here, God is present with God's people. In all the universe, here is God's foot stool! And, it is Spring. Time to celebrate that the winter is past! The dove makes her nest beside the entrance to the Temple. Flowers bloom and cherry blossom petals waft heavenward in the wind and then descend like confetti as pilgrims gather in the streets. The Old City of Jerusalem is surrounded by a wall. The remnants of a fortress. Gates play an important part in the life of this city. Remembering when there was a need for protection. Each gate had its purpose. "The sheep gate," where the sheep were brought in from the fields. "The fish gate." "The old gate." "The valley gate." "The dung gate," where refuse was taken out of the city to be burned. "The fountain gate." "The water gate." "The horse gate." "The east gate." "The gate Miphkad."

Today, there are eight major gates into the City. In ancient times there were 10 or 12 or more.

Today, moving counter-clockwise, from the northern-most gate are: Herod's Gate, the Damascus Gate, the New Gate, Jaffa Gate, Zion Gate, the Dung Gate, the Eastern Gate, and the Lions' Gate. The Eastern Gate is the one we focus on today. It faces the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley. It is also called the Golden Gate or the Beautiful Gate. In Hebrew, it is Sha'ar Harahamim, the "Gate of Mercy." The Eastern Gate is considered the oldest gate today. But the one we see today was constructed in the 6th or 7th century AD. It was completely sealed shut in the 16th Century by order of Suleiman the Magnificent, a sultan of the Ottoman Empire, to prevent the Jewish Messiah from gaining entrance to Jerusalem. Jewish tradition states that the Messiah will pass through the Eastern Gate when He comes to rule. If the gate were open today, it is the closest entrance to where the Jewish temple used to be.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives in the year 30 AD this sealed up gate is the location where he would have entered. Today, if excavation were allowed, Jesus' Eastern Gate could be found underground—under the current visible one—the one now sealed over with cement blocks. (This upper Eastern Gate has remained sealed for the past 500 years.) The very fact that it is sealed, speaks of its historical importance.

O what a beautiful City! —historic, sacred—a holy city. The city that Jesus loved and lamented. The night before his Palm Sunday procession and entry he said:

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers!
How often I have wanted to gather your children together
as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings,
but you would not let me.*

As Matthew and Luke tell the story of what was to happen, there are no real surprises. Jesus was a man on a mission. He had a specific, well-prayed out purpose. He commissioned his disciples to make the necessary arrangements. A colt. A crowd. And a triumphal entry through the Eastern gate. Knowing full well what awaited him in that city *that kills prophets and stones God's messengers*. There were other gates he could have chosen. Gates for returning Armies, conquering soldiers, successful merchants, and annual tourists. Jesus choose to enter through the Eastern Gate, the Golden Gate. The Gate of Mercy. I wonder. I wonder if the people who were with Jesus on that day, including his closest disciples really understood what "entering in triumph" meant. And I wonder if we do.

For a start, this triumphal entry is not a display of strength and power. This is not a story of conquest and victory. There are no tanks or guns or rocket force. Triumph in God's world does not look like triumph in our world. Christ rides a colt into Jerusalem, not a war horse. He is surrounded by peasants, not an imperial army. His followers carry leafy branches, not weapons. He is a man of peace, not violence. He is a servant, not a commander. Are we prepared to see triumph and kingship in these terms and with these symbols? Palm Sunday and Holy Week can be challenging and confusing! If nothing else, Palm Sunday and Holy Week is an opportunity to examine our own challenging and confusing lives and access our own definitions of success and purpose. To "Go deep" as Dr. Thurman says. That's what this day and this week are all about. Holy Week is an invitation to "Go deep."

In a recent article by David Brooks, Brooks distinguishes between two ways of living—he calls it climbing two different mountains. "First mountain people" have an ultimate allegiance to self. Their hustling years are powerfully shaped by individualist and meritocratic culture. "I can make myself happy, and if I achieve excellence and success, fulfillment will follow." "Second mountain people" have an ultimate allegiance to some commitment. Something happened when they were climbing the first mountain that interrupted their linear existence and what they had imaged for themselves. Through some pain or disappointment, or even from success that was found to be empty, they learned that there must be more to life, some higher purpose. . . . Some people are broken open. For some, goals dramatically shift. Love takes the center—an inexplicable gratitude and caring for each other emerges. It's not about self anymore; it's about relationships, it's about giving yourself away. When you're on the second mountain, you realize we aim too low. On the second mountain you see that happiness is good, but joy is better.

Brooks is on to something. He's not describing everything about how we live, but certainly, he points to the experiential fact that there are different visions and different values, and that what looks like success may actually be failure and what looks like failure may actually be success—depending on perspective and your ultimate purpose. For Jesus, his perspective and ultimate purpose was to do God's will— no matter what. To love and heal, and unite, and bring a fearful people back to God and to empower them with a life which even death could not derail or destroy. To release the power of God for the benefit and life of those most in need. To begin a movement—courage over fear, light over darkness, love over of hate — a victory nothing sort of life over death,

Perhaps the key to appreciating and understanding the story of Palm Sunday and Holy Week, is to realize that what we perceive as success or failure is determined by the vision and goals

that define and shape Jesus' life and that defines and shapes our own. What the world looked upon as defeat, the Gospels celebrate as victory.

O what a beautiful city.

I wonder through which gate you will chose to enter

Amen.