

A Time to Grow: Time

April 10, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Mark 11:1-11

Mark 14:32-42

So, last week we started a conversation that I would like to continue today. The conversation was all about those things in a garden – and those things in life – that we cannot control. We've spent most of the season of Lent talking about those things that we *can* control – at least, to some degree. Water. Sunshine. Soil conditions. Plant spacing. Weed control. Even in areas like what I grew up in, where the soil is pretty bad, and water is scarce, there are things that we can *do* to help that. Fertilizer. Compost. Making sure we *water* our gardens when we live in a climate in which God doesn't naturally do that for us. Planning and being intentional about what we plant, and where, and when.

And then, being realistic. Recognizing that even when we do everything right, there are things over which we have little or no control. We can't control the weather. We can't always ward off disaster. Sometimes in life, stuff happens and there is nothing that we can do about it, except to stand with God as we look across the valley of dry bones and trust that a new day is coming.

And there is another thing that we can't control, much as we would sometimes like to be able to, and that is the passage of time and the cycles of the earth.

Here's what I mean by that:

Here in Pennsylvania, we are blessed to be able to celebrate four distinct seasons. And every year, we pretty much know what to expect with each season. Even young kids know it.

In the springtime, we get the grass turning green, and trees either bursting forth in bloom, or re-growing their leaves that they dropped last fall. Flowers start poking their way up through the ground. Birds are *everywhere* – robins and finches and blackbirds and hawks. I was out hiking a couple of weeks ago and saw a red-headed woodpecker. Always a delightful treat. And a few weeks before that, a golden eagle. As the ground starts to warm up, we start to plant things, and begin to see signs of life all around us.

A few months from now, summer will hit. Cool, crisp mornings will give way to hot, sometimes muggy days. But also, berries will start ripening. Berries are my favorite. Summer used to be my least-favorite season of the year because of the heat, but Pennsylvania has turned it into one of my favorite seasons, because there is almost nothing in the world that I love more than going out with a bucket and picking fresh blueberries.

The fireflies also come out in the summer. And so does the poison ivy. But that's another conversation for another time.

Then the fall. Where the weather starts to get cool again, and so we begin to flavor our harvest foods with warming spices of cinnamon and nutmeg and cloves and allspice. That is crazy season around these parts with the apple harvest. It's the time when the year's growing season begins to wind its way down, and the whole earth starts to prepare itself for hibernation. The trees stop producing chlorophyll, at which point we start to see the true colors of the tree's leaves – vibrant hues of reds and oranges and yellows, right before they turn brown and fall to the ground.

And then, winter. Marked by cold, and sometimes snow and ice. A season in which the world is certainly not dead, but some days it really looks it. A season in which darkness lingers for a long time, and so we put up artificial lights – twinkly Christmas lights – to bring a little bit more light and joy and color into the world.

And then, it begins to warm up and the whole cycle starts all over again.

We know this rhythm. We live this rhythm every year, year after year. We plan and prepare based on this rhythm. This repeating cycle.

Until something happens that interrupts the cycle. Like a freak snowfall in March. Or even later.

I think probably the coldest I have ever been was one year back in about 1999 or 2000, when I went backpacking in the mountains of northern New Mexico in July. And we wound up hiking through snowdrifts the entire hike.

In July. In New Mexico. That is freakishly weird.

Some winters, we get a lot of snow. And others, very little. Some winters drag on and on and on, long into the springtime. And other years, spring starts early and it is here to stay. Some Easter sunrise services are pleasant and warm. And others leave our teeth chattering. Same thing with Halloween. I've taken kids trick-or-treating when it has been 70 degrees, and when it has been 30 degrees.

It makes it a little bit hard to know exactly *how* to plan or to prepare. The best gardeners out there know that you can't just pick an arbitrary date on the calendar – say, March 1 – and go out and consistently plant on that day. You have to feel things out, and just kind-of intuitively *know* that now is the right time. Or else, know that no, we need to wait a little bit longer this year.

I've heard some gardeners describe gardening a little bit like constant whiplash, where everything is constantly changing. The seasons are constantly changing. The weather and the overall climate is consistently inconsistent, between one year and the next. The one thing you can consistently expect is that no two growing years are going to be exactly the same. The decisions you make one year might not work the next. It's exciting. It keeps you on your toes. And for those who make their living on the growing seasons, it can be nervewracking.

This kind of "whiplash" – this never quite knowing exactly what to expect – was one of the defining features of Jesus's life and ministry – but never more so than in the last week of his life. The ups and the downs; the highs and the lows; the great expectations and the dashed hopes; the joy, followed by the unspeakable suffering and pain and confusion and anguish, followed again by unmatched joy – that, my friends, is Holy Week.

And it begins today in a great, high, holy moment. A moment of excitement. Of hope. Of anticipation and expectation. I've heard some people talk about Palm Sunday as being "Easter Light." The "warm up act" for the resurrection.

And as we read the story, it really feels like it. It feels like going outside in late February and seeing the sun come out for the first time in months, and feeling the sun warming everything up to 60 degrees. And all you want to do is go for a hike, or sit on the front porch and soak in the beauty. And say "hallelujah, spring is here!" only to get hit by the worst snowstorm of the year the very next day.

We've been experiencing a lot of that this year. Spring's here! Wait...whoops...no, it's not. Back and forth, like a constant pendulum. Cold, then warm. Beautiful, then yucky again.

In our first scripture today, the weather is beautiful. The sun is shining. The daffodils are blooming. The disciples are having a great day. They've been on the road for a long time, travelling for days and days, and finally, it is their last day of travel. Because today, they are going to get to Jerusalem, their final destination. They are looking forward to taking a much-deserved rest. Settling in and celebrating Passover together with one another, there in the "hub" of Jewish faith and life.

And Jerusalem is bustling that day. Everybody who is anybody is there for the holiday weekend. All of them excited to celebrate, once again, the story of their people. The story of how God has protected and sustained them from the very beginning.

Add to that, the fact that the disciples get to come to Jerusalem and celebrate Passover *with Jesus*. And they just know that something big is going to happen. Something noteworthy. Something exciting. Is this the moment when Jesus is going to throw all caution to the wind and cast off all of his outer garments and reveal who he really is?

The promised messiah? The one who is going to overthrow all of the oppressive regimes and establish God's kingdom on earth once and for all?

This has to be that time. And the disciples can't wait to see it. They are already thinking about where they might be able to procure an impressive war horse for Jesus to ride into town on, so that everybody who is anybody there in Jerusalem that day might know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Jesus is here; that God is breaking into the world; and that God means business.

Although after a little while, it becomes apparent that Jesus isn't exactly on-board with the disciples' vision of how this day is going to play out. Because when they get close to town, Jesus doesn't send the disciples for a war horse. He sends them for a donkey. And not just any donkey. A colt. A baby donkey, that has never before been ridden.

That's not quite what the disciples were expecting. Riding into town on a baby donkey? That's not intimidating at all. That's not a show of power, or military force, or heavenly strength. In fact, in that culture and time, for a king or a military leader to ride into town on a donkey, was tantamount to riding into town waving an olive branch. It was a signal that this person comes in peace. And for that donkey not even to be full-grown...well, that's just silly. Who would even do that? It would look ridiculous. Jesus and his disciples would be a laughing stock.

But nevertheless, the disciples go and procure this donkey, and think about how they are going to salvage the situation. And so they think, "let's make this like a parade. Lots of pomp and circumstance. Maybe if we are loud enough, and make enough noise and generate enough excitement, maybe the people won't even notice the baby donkey.

"Oh! And also, maybe if we pile up enough of our cloaks on the back of the donkey before Jesus sits on it, maybe it will look bigger and more impressive than it really is. It's worth a shot!"

So that's what they do. They lay their cloaks on the poor little colt, and Jesus climbs on the back, and the disciples run and gather leafy tree branches that they have cut from the fields, and they run ahead of Jesus, whooping and hollering, and giving branches to bystanders to wave and lay before Jesus on the road.

Because, you know, there is no red carpet to roll out. Jesus has seen to that. So the disciples have to do the next-best thing. They get the people to lay their cloaks in the road to give Jesus a grand royal entrance. And all the people, led most loudly by the disciples, shout "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

And what I really find fascinating here is watching Jesus's response. What he says and does, and more importantly, what he *does not* say. And in fact, Jesus doesn't say much.

He is absolutely silent while the crowds are whooping and hollering and shouting and praising. Mark tells us that when he gets into town, he goes into the temple, looks around, comes out again, and goes to bed. That's it. No speech, no battle cry...nothing. He just ignores the whole frenzy. It's like he knows that this beautiful, sunny, 60-degree day in late February is not, in fact, the start of spring. And the snowstorm that is about to come will be huge.

Now, in the next few days that follow, Jesus *does* have a lot to say. He argues with religious leaders; he preaches and teaches and does what Jesus does. He has some pretty harsh words to say about the destruction of the temple and coming doom and gloom. He's kinda like Punxsutawney Phil seeing his shadow and predicting six more weeks of winter.

And in one giant whiplash, that's exactly what happens. The clouds form, the temperature drops 40 degrees, and the snow starts to fall. And in our second reading today we see Jesus again, but this time he's not silently riding into town with excited crowds hailing him. This time, we see Jesus distressed. Agitated. Pleading with his disciples to "please, stay awake. And pray with me. Because I need you know, more than I've ever needed you before." Pleading with his father, "let this cup pass from me," and then going back and finding his disciples fast asleep in the garden, just as this snow storm is about to turn into a giant blizzard.

Spring is coming. We know that, because we have read the rest of the story. The resurrection is coming. The snow will melt. What appears to be dead will rise again.

But not yet. That's the frustrating part of Holy Week. We want to skip past the winter to get to the spring. We want to skip past the pain to get to the resurrection. We want to skip straight from the Hosannas to the Alleluias.

But we can't. Because without the pain of the tomb, there is no joy in the empty tomb.

So my friends, here is the invitation for us this Holy Week: Don't just sail right through it. Tempting as it might be. As busy as life might be. Take the time to do what the disciples could not – to pray with Jesus in the garden. To feast with Jesus in the upper room. To stand at the foot of the cross and witness love pouring out. To hold the emptiness that is there in our times of grief. And then, when the time is right and the winter is *truly* past, to sing our Alleluias with everything we've got.