

Dear friends in Christ



April 10, 2022, Palm Sunday

## “Keep Hope Alive”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission  
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11;  
Luke 22:14-23:56

“Let the same **Mind** be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself...”<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, Palm Sunday is a procession into humility. It is a drama of emptying out -- setting aside one's own prerogatives, one's rights. That is the mind of Christ. To go to Jerusalem is to willingly enter the pain and suffering of the world. To head for Jerusalem in our day means, “DO NOT LOOK AWAY.” Allow this distressed world to penetrate your soul. Those broken bodies on Ukrainian roads and highways, on that train station platform in Kramatorsk -- they are Christ crucified.

This was Jesus' choice some two thousand years ago in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire. “He set his face towards

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:5-8a.

Jerusalem,” is how the story goes. This week the Church sets its face towards Jerusalem. Do not look away.

As the Jewish Passover approached there were two parades in the city that morning. According to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book, *The Last Week*,<sup>2</sup> the choice was between a humble rabbi with a message of peace, rebirth and joy -- and the full might of Caesar. That morning before the Passover festivities, imperial Roman legions marched into the Antonia Fortress to ensure law and order during the Jewish high festival. *Pax Romana*.

As we approach the events of Holy Week, Caesar’s military might looks more like tanks, missiles and bombs. It is born of the same cruelty – indiscriminate massacres, wanton destruction, rape, looting and torture. Nothing much has changed over two thousand years. As it turns out, most empires pretty much end up being evil empires. How can they not when the goal is always conquest and subjugation?

This new Caesar, Vladimir Putin, looks more like Vlad the Impaler, who had tens of thousands of his captives impaled on stakes when he returned home. The atrocities now being committed in Ukraine by Putin’s Russian hordes are of the same medieval cruelty. This is a new Caesar’s rampage across Ukraine.

Putin is ignorant or dismissive of Thomas Pane’s warning on the horrors war brings to a nation.

“He who is the author of a war lets loose the whole contagion of hell and opens a vein that bleeds a nation to death” -- a lesson Caesar never learns, no matter the epoch. A lesson of which America is too often dismissive.

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2006).

On the other side of the city is another procession. This was a procession of a little-known rabbi and his followers from the countryside. His reputation as a noted teacher and healer had preceded him. Some thought that he might be the anointed one come to rid their land of the despised Romans. Some thought he might be the one to herald in a new age spoken of by the prophet Isaiah – a new age when the crippled would be healed, the blind would see and there would be an abundance of food and drink for all.

People joined the band waving palm branches and little children skipped and ran along side. But for Jesus this was no picnic. This was deadly serious business. This was a parade of resistance. A parade of the disinherited and beat down. The locked out and shut out.

Opposite Caesar's army, in places like Bucha, Mariupol and Kramatorsk there are now other processions. Not at all joyful as on that first Palm Sunday. It is the procession of Ukrainians emerging from basements where they have been sheltering for weeks with little food or light. Squinting as they emerge into the bright sunlight for the first time in days.

They gather up the dead lying about the roads, in gardens and on that bloody railway station platform. They carry the wounded to hospitals, praying those will not be bombed as well. They light fires to melt snow for drinking water. They seek for others, hoping to find neighbors, family and friends still alive. They begin combing through the dust covered rubble searching for family mementos and documents, for anything of use in what had been their homes.

This is a saga of imperial might arrayed against vulnerability. Russian armor and planes up against ordinary people who simply wanted to live their lives. People who sought only a bit of joy in passing birthdays, weddings, baptisms and bar mitzvas.

Just ordinary folks wanting to go about their lives and pass on a little bit to their children. People who love their homeland.

As they welcome the liberating Ukrainian army, receive the first food in days, that is their meager joy. These stunned survivors will find some little satisfaction in telling their stories of endurance to the media now entering their towns with the soldiers. Hoping that those responsible will be held to account for their crimes. To bear witness is some satisfaction.

In the midst of this carnage, hope is pretty scarce, yet it's evident in the resolve of these survivors emerging from their basements. These are the living, determined to carry on. They will hold on to one another. They will share what little is to be had. They will weep together and pray together. This is the other procession we witness this Palm Sunday. And they will, in the words of Jessie Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, KEEP HOPE ALIVE.

In the midst of such devastation are the followers of Jesus to be found. They are the ones on the scene offering aid and comfort. Binding up the wounded. Grieving the dead. These are they, who in the face of death, proclaim hope and that life endures. Proclaim resistance even to the gates of Hell. They are the ones who send in what little they can afford for the relief efforts.

In America we have witnessed those of that parade for human dignity and opportunity in the confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court.

That celebration is most joyful. To see the strength of her sisterhood, those other black women who hung together despite their own doubts at times as to whether they were even worthy of Harvard Law School -- Lisa Fairfax, Antoinette Coakley and Nina Simmons. Despite racial slurs and the dismissive attitude of some professors -- they prevailed through the strength of this glorious Sisterhood.

That scene of the three of Ketanji's Sisters-In-Law, to borrow a moniker from Barbara McQuade and the other women of her podcast by the same name – to see them on the *Last Word* with Lawrence O'Donnell – that interview was a cause for tears of pure Gospel Joy as they shared their stories of Ketanji and how they all pulled through together. And, at the top of their class. These women are leaders of a parade which leads all the way to the Promised Land of full Personhood and Unlimited Opportunity. They are the very Glory of God – fully alive, full of accomplishment. You want a Glory Attack? – you catch that interview!<sup>3</sup>

I close with another occasion for pure joy which grew out of this event. As the votes in the Senate were being tallied, Vice President Kamala Harris, presiding at the vote, called the few Black senators to her desk. She gave each a sheet of her own personal stationery with the seal of the Vice President on it. She then assigned each to write to a girl what this moment meant to them – the confirmation of the first Black woman to the Supreme Court in its 233-year history.

One of those summoned to the Vice President's desk was the new senator from Georgia, Senator Ralph Warnock. I close with the letter he wrote. Written in the Mind of Christ. Written to his young daughter. This is what the senator wrote:

7 April 2022

Dear Chloe,

Today we confirmed Ketanji Brown Jackson to the United States Supreme Court. In our nation's history, she is the first Supreme Court Justice who looks like you – with hair like yours. While we were voting on the floor of the Senate, a friend of mine – the Vice President of the United States

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/Lawrence/status/1506282845718949888>, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/supreme-court-ketanji-brown-jackson-friends-harvard/>.

handed me this piece of paper and suggested I write a note to someone who comes to mind. By the way, she is the first Vice President who also looks like you! So, I write this note to say you can be anything, achieve anything you set your head and heart to do.

Love you! Dad

If our nation can bring itself to continue forward in that humble and hopeful spirit, we will come closer to our nation's ideals, and to the Mind of Christ... If we can take on the spirit of sisterhood Ketanji's classmates have shared over the passing years... If we can take on the perseverance and solidarity of these Ukrainian survivors -- We will KEEP HOPE ALIVE. And have some little part of the Mind of Christ.

That's the Palm Sunday parade I want to join. With this mind and spirit, we really are heading to that heavenly kindom<sup>4</sup> where all are valued as of infinite worth. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> As we're all kin in Christ, this term is much more appropriate than "Kingdom" – this from the Rev. Mike Kinman of All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA.