

Sermon: What Are You Waving For?
Text: John 12:12-19
Date: April 14, 2019
Context: WWPC
Palm Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

They took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!'

John 12:13

Recently, on a popular nation-wide radio program, one of the newly announced candidates for president disclosed that, yes, she does sometimes listen to music by well-known hip hop artists.

Another top candidate then separately announced the name of his favorite book, Finnegan's Wake, as it turns out..

I'm not sure what the candidates' goal was in releasing this information. Perhaps just to give the general public a better sense of who they are as people. What I do know for sure is that in both cases, it did not go over well.

The Twitter-sphere erupted. Some people were merely surprised, understandable if you're not a fan of hip hop or have ever tried to read Finnegan's Wake. Others were disappointed. Still others were offended. And many were outraged.

Why?

In the former case, the question of the first candidate's musical preferences got a little bit tangled up with her views on another controversial policy issue.

But even so, why the uproar?

Nowadays it seems like people are in an uproar about everything, all the time. Someone recently posted an article on FB from the Washington Post which pointed out that scientists have discovered that dog lovers are happier than cat lovers.

I resisted the urge to post the article on my own Facebook page because I feared that it would start a war and, even though it was science and not my opinion, I didn't want that war to be directed at me.

Why is there so much outrage these days?

As strange as this may sound -- and I need you to stick with me here for a second, I believe that part of the answer can be traced to tomatoes.

Doctors and nutritionists have lately realized that a surprisingly wide range of common foods -- including tomatoes -- cause inflammation in our bodies, at the cellular level.

But it's not just foods. Other factors also cause such inflammation, stress and anxiety foremost among them.

It's important to note that not all inflammation is bad. Brief periods of high-intensity exercise produce inflammation that is short-lived and beneficial, causing our cells to rejuvenate slightly each time we exercise.

Similarly, when we are injured, the area around the injury tends to swell noticeably. (You know this if you've ever sprained an ankle.) Such swelling serves to protect the area, and to promote healing in the affected muscle or joint.

But chronic inflammation is a different thing entirely. It can adversely affect our vascular health, especially in the veins and arteries in and around the heart, but also in the veins and arteries in other organs, including our brains.

It is also inextricably related to many other painful conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis, asthma and a variety of diseases in our digestive tracts.

All of which has made me wonder about potential sources of inflammation that affect not our bodies but our souls. Things like anger, outrage, and despair.

Which matters more than ever at this moment in American history.

The news is rough these days. No doubt about it.

Every week it feels like we watch obvious attempts to obstruct justice play out live, on national television. And nothing happens. No one is held accountable.

This past week several members of the administration went before congress or went on television and essentially thumbed their noses at lawful requests to produce important documents, as though the law, and congressional oversight, simply does not apply to them. And nothing happens.

Just this morning I read a story about how tax payers in red states are receiving bigger refunds than tax payers in blue states. And what can any of us do about that?

Now, pause.

See what I mean? If you're like me, your blood pressure is higher after hearing those last several comments than it was just before I mentioned them.

Why? Because, as the political commentator Sally Kohn recently observed, the news no longer informs us. It inflames us.

If left unchecked, this inflammation will not only damage your arteries over time, it will alter your soul and corrode your spirit.

So I think that's one reason there is so much tension in the air nowadays. And it is certainly something for all of us to be mindful of because I think it affects the way we see the world, and the way we see others who view it differently than we do.

We're all just a little bit inflamed right now. Or maybe even a lotta bit inflamed.

But I think the other reason for this tension is that we humans always have such high expectations for the people whom we hope will save us.

And such a strong sense of entitlement.

Whether it's a candidate or a savior, we want one who embodies exactly what we're looking for, someone who believes exactly as we believe, who advocates for all of our preferred policy positions, and supports our strongest theological biases.

And if they don't. Well, heaven help them. We will take to Twitter, or we'll take to the streets, and, well, we will crucify them.

So, on this last Sunday of Lent, on this gateway to Holy Week, I'd like for us to engage in our last exercise in Visio Divina.

Focus in on the image of the palm on the front of your bulletin, or on the palm on the banner behind me. If you're sitting close enough, take note there is a cross in the center of the palm.

Just let your eyes rest on this image for a moment.

When you processed in this morning, what were you waving those palms for? The answer is perhaps different for everyone, but what were you waving them for?

Who were you waving those palms for?

Who is Jesus to you? Savior? Teacher? Liberator? Myth? How does the way you view and understand him affect your faith?

Do you feel like God has ever disappointed you? How did that feel then? How does it feel now?

Has anyone else ever disappointed you, deeply enough that you remember it to this day? How did that feel then? How does it feel now?

Now, imagine that you're in the crowd that day when Jesus entered Jerusalem.

You were there when he raised Lazarus from the dead. You were so wonder-struck you've followed him to the capital, processed with him through the gates of the city.

If the road ahead takes a dark turn, will you follow him, to the end?

Will you follow him to the garden?

To the cross?

To the tomb?

To Easter?