

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“A Change In Perspective”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, April 5, 2020**

**Ephesians 6:11-15**

*Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.*

**Matthew 21:1-11**

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*‘Tell the daughter of Zion,*

*Look, your king is coming to you,*

*humble, and mounted on a donkey,*

*and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*‘Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you offer us the living word. Open our hearts and minds together as we listen and hear as we wrestle and as we remember we are together in the body of Christ. Amen.

I don't know about you, but in our house, we have a huge file in a cabinet filled with manuals. One for the fridge, one for the washer, the garage door, the microwave, and on and on and on. Each one of them is pages long filled with information that we may never use, but once in a while, they do come in handy and my husband, who is far more organized than I am, knows where to go to get our manuals and I was amazed the other day when he figured out why our kitchen faucet suddenly wouldn't work. At first, we thought it was a plumbing issue. We moved the handles back and forth and nothing came out, but then Scott looked in this handy-dandy file and learned that the faucet has batteries in it for the on and the off light on this new-fangled kind of faucet. So batteries for a faucet, who knew? A few batteries and ta-da! Water came out again. It was the manual that helped us find our way to the solution. There are manuals for many different things--running meetings, emergency procedures, church's committees, doing taxes, etc. They can be helpful, sometimes confusing, but often a good place to start. And that made me think about what it was like for the disciples and the others who believed Jesus to be the Messiah.

In the days of holy week it becomes clear, while some of them thought they knew what the Messiah would be like, the mental manual or blueprints they had drawn up in their minds and hearts didn't unfold according to plan. Things happened that they had never expected and they had to adapt. And can't we relate? Today is the day we remember the parade that greeted Jesus as he came back into Jerusalem for the last time. The church manual on Palm Sunday includes children and palms and sounds of

shouting, "Hosanna." A day filled with energy, the joy, and excitement from those who had anticipated the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah who would change the world. But this year does feel a bit muted. Our world has changed and though we sing Hosannas, it's hard to feel like our voices ring with the same fullness of joy as we have in the last years.

But then I found myself thinking maybe it gives us a glimpse into the feelings of those who were there that day and the days that followed that we could relate a bit to the feelings of the disciples and other followers as they walked through those days. Now, we can imagine, at first, the sense of joy about Jesus' return to Jerusalem. We hear that the crowds outside the gates of the city were following him with palm leaves waving. But I imagine that for the disciples it might feel a little different. I have no doubt that they had sensed a change in Jesus' behavior because he was sensing the dangers and difficulties of his return, but they do his bidding and bring him a colt and a donkey and others prepare a room for the meal. But clearly, things are getting stirred up in Jerusalem. The news of the triumphal entry accordant to royalty, move through the city. And add to that, in the following days, he upturns the tables of the money changers and does other things that concern the officials in the city. Tensions were rising, and then he gathered with those he loved for a meal, the meal of Passover, a holy meal of the faith that he had learned and known all his life, the story of difficulty and slavery that ends in deliverance, a story of the struggle of the many years that the Hebrew people had wandered with no manual to guide them. It was then and there they became the people of God who learned to trust in God, but on that night at the Passover, Jesus speaks of new things like sacrifice, struggle, and death, in the meal, in a different way. And a number of them were confused and trying to understand.

Now, in the days to come, they will understand new things but not in the way they had expected. Some had thought that Jesus as the Messiah would save them all in a way of power and might, but instead, he rides in on a colt. He's not prepared for battle as many who awaited the Messiah would have imagined. Indeed, he does battle in a whole different way for he's prepared to live and die by his own word, not the sword, not killings, not a show of power. Rather, he does battle with justice, truth, and love. The wheat does unfold though, with the challenges of betrayal and denial and death, but in time, the disciples come to know that this is not the end of the story. They become aware that the meaning of power in the world has been turned upside down. A world that relied on power and might is now challenged, and it's a whole different kind of battle, unexpected and heretofore unknown, one with new challenges and many changes. What matters now is not might and power but justice, truth, and love.

I think we can relate to unexpected events and changes entering into a way of living that feels unknown. We face a battle, in essence. It's easy to feel anxiety and fear in the midst of these days, but that is not the whole story. It's about keeping on with hope. It's about finding new ways of living and moving and having our being, of seeking how to help one another keep some sense of normalcy for those we love, especially our children. Some of us do it simply by staying at home, but others are on the frontlines caring for the sick. And others stock shelves with groceries, food that becomes holy food and holy meals in this time, so we are together in the midst of a battle, a battle nonetheless. It's a different kind, but I found myself, when I was writing this and thinking about this, about the passage from Ephesians. The verses speak of the enemy as the devil, sometimes known as the tempter, but it also came to me that as the living word, it also invites us to look at another way of doing battle. The tempter might be despair and loss of hope. These feelings are understandable, and we're called to encourage one another on this journey, some of us in our more up moments and others as we struggle. Indeed, scripture says where there is no vision, people perish. Help then means having a vision of the future. We are, as people of faith, called to see new ways and have new visions to prepare for a different kind of battle. And I found myself thinking of the ordination questions we ask of our officers. "Will you serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" And I think that seems to sum up what we all need to wage battle at this time, to find creative ways to help, to do new things, to communicate, to support, to encourage, and to love.

The inventory of different kinds of battle plans came to me in a very unexpected, indirect way the other night. My husband had called his cousin Barb and her husband Tim, to touch base. And Tim talked about the work his brother Craig Smith is facing as chief of surgery at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York. I cannot imagine a more ground zero than that place right now. Tim told Scott, "My brother writes a newsletter every day for the staff he works with in the hospital." And said, "I'll send it to you by email." So Scott told me about it and said, "Tim has sent them to me. Do you want to read them?" And I just looked at him. I said, "After watching the news the last couple of weeks, I can no longer just listen to worst-case scenarios. I'm just going to do my thing the best I can, staying at home or clustered in my office, and I think I'll pass." But Scott began to read them. He said to me, "No, I think you need to hear this." And so I read his letters and I was glad I did. Craig's daily missives contain words of wisdom and thoughtful reflection. He's very pragmatic about the numbers and the enemy of the virus they face. And he knows that planning is essential.

Quoting John Wooden, a modern revolutionary he calls him, said, "Failing to plan is planning to fail. This will not be us," he said.

Craig said, "I want to share some encouraging developments. No one is standing still wringing their hands. While it's hard not to feel under siege, the creativity of my colleagues is raising my spirits. Engineers are working on 3D printing solutions to the scarcity of face shields. Another group working on methods for sterilizing used masks. Anesthesiology and ICU teams are working night and day to implement the split ventilator idea. He went on to say, "Indeed, the history of healthcare shows us that wars are time of acceleration in the art and science of surgery. But those of us in surgery depend on others to lead us through. And this is the time for us to cheer them on. No one is smarter than all of us. Our leaders of tomorrow will come forth in these days as they see and develop new and creative solutions." Craig then said, "Many of us are being deployed in other places and redeployment is service. It is sacrifice. It is scary. And it meets the mission." And then he added, "To you who are deployed, we will not leave you alone out there." He went on to say, "A forest of bamboo bends to the ground in the storm but rarely breaks." We are that forest, and we must not break.

For Craig, this is a battle for life, and he believes life finds a way. Life finds a way for love in the future. He knows there is a price that will be paid. He knows of the challenges we are facing. But I was moved by the ways in which he understands that this is more than about him and more than about might. They have a plan, and they're working the plan. They're responding in creative new ways and not just reacting. The battle is about commitment, courage, and compassion. That is the essence of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. And so we are in the midst of this battle. And for some, it is literally a battle for their lives.

Another person said to me, "In the days to come when we move slowly beyond this time, the world will be different and we will be different." And I think she is right. Yet, we are a people of faith. As a people of faith who live on this side of Holy Week, we know that the crucifixion is not the end of the story. And because of that, we are called to have hope and vision and seek out glimmers of light, trusting that, in the end, life will go on, for certainly, it will. For spring has arrived and new life comes forth. Babies will continue to be born. People will connect and reconnect with those they haven't talked to. Parents and children will find the gift sharing time together that often got lost in the hustle and bustle of life. Acts of kindness will ease lonely hearts. Birthdays will still occur, and anniversaries will still be remembered. And, no doubt, love will be found among those who have been thrown together by the circumstances of these days.

This is what it means to be a people of faith, to trust in the promises of God, to believe that life and light will triumph over death and darkness. We are to encourage each other when we struggle at different moments remembering those words to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. This is a reminder that hope and peace are not always easy to come by, but they are aspects of faith we are called to aspire to. The unfolding events of Holy Week will be a reminder that even in the darkness, the light of love can lead us in new ways, armed with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. We will find our way armed by the love and promises of God. The God we love, who offers us never-ending love. The one who sent his son that we might know new life here and in the time to come.

So let us remember the story of those in the wilderness. A story of great challenge and struggle that ended in freedom, hope, and new life. And may we remember it for ourselves as the "manual" for the days to come. And we remember these words from Paul, "Neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thanks be to God. Amen.