

Palm Sunday 2020
Time to Lay Your Branches Down
(In response to COVID-19)

Mark 11:1-11

St. Andrew's – Jacksonville, OR — By Fr. Bill Baker

“...And they brought the colt to Jesus, and cast their garments on him; and he sat upon him. And many spread their garments in the way: and others cut down branches off the trees, and strawed them in the way. And they that went before, and they that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord...”

In case you haven't heard, we are in the middle of a worldwide Pestilence; a pandemic that has changed the way we operate on a daily basis, a pandemic that attempts to separate us, shutting down our businesses and closing our churches. Today's Covid-19 virus is serious, causing distress of nations and rending the hearts of many families.

It has now been 20 years since our last worldwide scare...and economic pandemic if you will that never amounted to much, but was very real nonetheless. In 1999, on the eve of the new millennium, there was a certain amount of fear and overreaction to the unknown and possible collapse of the economic system on a global scale. There was no fear of illness nor of death but merely a financial panic that drove people into various abnormal activities. It also changed the way people conducted their lives in the midst of that uncertainty. It was during this Y2K ambiguity that I witnessed many without faith falling into distress, concerned about their futures and wondering if this could be the end of life as they had come to know it. The same and more can be said of our current dealings with the Corona Virus.

It is interesting, to me anyway, how so many talk about how God works in the small places of our lives, the little things that seem insignificant but yet make such great differences in how we perceive the world around us. But, when a catastrophe ensues those same people want to blame God for striking us down, punishing us for our sins. Is this fair or is this simply a justification for our ill actions stemming from the Garden when Adam and Eve chose to listen to Satan instead of the Word of God? In Acts 14:22 St. Luke reminds us that we will go through many

tribulations before entering the Kingdom of God. We must remind ourselves that it is not God who strikes us down but it is our own willful neglect whereby we chose to turn from God in the first place and what we saw in 1999 and what we are experiencing now are results of a lack of faith and poor choices because humanity has chosen to do life on their own. Sin has ripple through all aspects of God's creation...it is the result of sin that is causing our pain...not the indignation of God.

Y2K shook up some people. Some came to realize that they are not in control and that life is more than simply a series of days adding up to a life lived well or a life lived in mediocrity. And now 20 years later we have another worldwide crisis that not only affects our global economy, but has serious ramifications on our mental stability and the prognosis of life as we know it.

Some are asking, "Why does God allow this? Why does God not put a stop to such evil?" We may not understand why, but these times of great tribulation are evidences of the sin that permeates human kind; choices we have made to not get along; judging instead of loving each other. But, if taken advantage of, it is times like these that can be used as a catapult for a grand global response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Bruce Atkinson, in an essay on the Judgment of God and COVID-19 writes this:

"Jesus did tell us that bad things would happen—(and he quotes John 16:33) *"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"*. In other words, (he continues) we are still in a spiritual war zone in a fallen world, but this situation is temporary and God will put it all right in the end. Physical death is not the worst that can happen to God's children because we have heaven and the Resurrection coming. The worst that can happen is to lose our faith. God is providing opportunities for people to examine their priorities and turn to Him in repentance" (Dr. Bruce Atkinson, *The Judgment of God and the COVID-19 Virus*).

So, what do we make of such large scale events? What is the church's responsibility as we traverse such deep waters? Is there room for hope?

Is it okay to be joyous, to be happy, to be content in times like these?
Yes, yes it is! We can have all these things even now because we know where our strength comes from!

“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” Nehemiah tells us. (Nehemiah 8:10).

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” the Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah. (Isaiah 41:10).

“The Lord is my strength and my song; he has given me victory” we read in the book Exodus. (Exodus 15:2).

The ‘Victory’ indeed...the church is coming to the end of its Lenten season and victory is on the horizon. It is Palm Sunday and a time to lay our burdens down at the feet of Jesus as we come clean ourselves putting our trust in His righteous love.

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It is in Luke’s Gospel where we see Jesus, as he comes near to Jerusalem and beheld the city – and he, seeing the people unprepared, wept over it... Jesus is more than **interested** in your faith...Jesus is more than **concerned** with your salvation. Jesus wants to enter your hearts and abide **eternally** with you and whether you are willing to let him in or not, he comes onto you regardless because he has given his life that you may one day open your eyes and see. Nothing can take the Risen Lord away from us. Lent is experienced through the expectation of our Lord’s resurrection whereby we too are enabled to come to that glorious eternity within the loving arms of God. Some of us are laying our burdens down and taking up our crosses as we walk before the Lord preaching the Good News, while others are doing the same as they

remain steadfast followers of God's eternal will. All who abide in the lord are making their cry heard as we enter the city.

Those of you who are already part of the body of Christ, those of you who have faith to move mountains, those of you walk through the valley of the shadow of death laying your branches at the feet of Christ, are able to see the unpreparedness of those lost in their sins. Now is the time to use the technology of the day to spread the message of salvation because now is a time set aside to let our lights shine brightly!

Life is preparing us for the great celebration when we enter the Heavenly bosom of our Father in Heaven! God's response to our sin is to inspire the Church to spread the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and for all to repent! Don't miss the invitation...Jesus is knocking louder than ever, open the door and let him enter your heart and you will find peace. And may we all say "*Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord...*"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.