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Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ  
Bethesda, Maryland

Palm Sunday  
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10:00 AM

### **“Speaking”**

This sermon and I have wrestled together this week.  
We two, this sermon and I, have twisted and turned,  
Tossed about,  
And fretted with each other.

I have scratched down sentences  
With a pen on paper  
And the sermon has said,  
“Really, you want to say that out loud?”

I have deleted entire paragraphs  
On my laptop  
Only to hear the sermon say,  
“Why are you taking that out?”

I’ve emailed a few of you  
Some ideas to chew on.

I even made poor Mimi in our church office  
Listen to me hash this out a bit.

I translated the text from Greek,  
Read commentaries on the Gospel of John,  
Prayed,  
Sat and stared out the window,  
Fussed a bit and cussed some more,  
And started again.

I’m not sure where to begin.  
And not sure where this sermon will end.

Let’s start with an image  
I saw last week.  
Maybe you saw it too.

A crowd.  
 Gathered at a political rally.  
 A loud, chanting, cheering, curious, angry crowd.

There was a politician up front.

But first –  
 Before the politician—  
 There were religious leaders.

Because that is one of the things we do.  
 We trot out religious leaders at political rallies  
 To give the gathering  
 A veneer of holiness.

(As an aside, I confess—  
 I am a “religious leader”  
 And I have been on the podium at political events  
 And I am sorry for the times  
 I have allowed my role  
 To be bought by Caesar—  
 Bought by the temptation of fame  
 Or the blush of power.  
 I am sorry.)

And often when I see religious leaders  
 Invoking God’s blessings on partisan savagery  
 It makes me sad.)

But maybe you saw that image this week.  
 The crowd.  
 The religious hypocrites.  
 The populist politician bellowing and bullying.

If you saw the same image that I did  
 You may have seen  
 In the corner of the picture  
 A long-haired man,  
 Bearded, disheveled,  
 Out of place.

The crowd pushed him around a bit.  
 The security forces roughed him up.  
 He caught the eye of the politician, this man did.

And the politician began to work the crowd:

“See that troublemaker over there,”  
 The politician said to the crowd.  
 “See that good-for-nothing agitator,”  
 The politician said.

“What should we do with him,”  
 The politician asked the crowd.

“Get rid of him,” someone yelled from the crowd.  
 “Yeah, get rid of him,” said another.

“Get rid of him,” the politician asked the crowd  
 With a smirk.  
 “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” another person yelled.  
 “Get rid of him.”

“Get rid of him,” someone else said.  
 “Kill him. Just kill the troublemaker.  
 Kill him.”

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You may think the scene I am describing  
 Is from a current political event.  
 You may think I am describing  
 Something I saw on the news.

I'm not.

I'm describing a story that I read  
 This week  
 From the Gospel of John.

The story of the arrest and so-called “trial”  
 Of Jesus of Nazareth.

You see, Jesus had been eating with “sinners,”  
 With prostitutes and thieves—  
 Which was against the rules.

Jesus had been talking with women in public  
 And treating people with equality—  
 Which upset the social norms.

Jesus had been telling stories  
 Where the hero was from the enemy nation—  
 Which questioned the false god of patriotism.

Jesus had been healing people on the Sabbath—  
 Which was against the law.

Jesus said that God was found not just in the temple  
 But everywhere—  
 Which shook religious certainty

Jesus said that God was bigger than nation or party—  
 Which worried the people in the capital city  
 Who relied on nation and party for their pay checks and their prestige.

But,  
 Most shocking of all,  
 Jesus said,  
 “Be kind to everyone,  
 Love your enemies,  
 Turn the other cheek”—  
 Which brought into question an entire society  
 Built on  
 Killing  
 Revenge  
 And violence.

And so the powers of his day  
 Decided to kill him.

One night  
 He went out to pray,  
 And they arrested him—  
 For heresy they said—  
 For claiming to be a Child of God.

(John 19:7)

Then the religious leaders—  
 Because they were cowardly men—  
 Sent him to the politicians—  
 To Pilate the Governor.

There,  
 They accused him of treason—  
 Of claiming that God was greater than country.

(John 19:12)

The politician appealed to the people

“What do you want me to do  
With this good-for-nothing trouble maker,” he asked.

And the crowd roared back,  
“Kill him.  
Kill him.”

And here we are on this Palm Sunday  
When the chants of “Hosannah”  
Turn so swiftly to “Crucify Him.”

It is an old and sad and very new tale.

When the prophet Elijah  
Confronted King Ahab and Queen Jezebel  
About their transgressions,  
Jezebel and Ahab set out to kill Elijah.

When our Congregationalist ancestors  
Wanted the land of the Wampanoag Indians  
And the native chief Metacomet refused,  
The not-so-pure Puritans just killed the chief  
As he walked home  
One day in the woods.

When Emmett Till,  
An African American 14 year old  
From Chicago  
Visited his family in Money, Mississippi,  
In 1955  
And may or may not  
Have flirted with a white woman  
The white bullies of his town  
Didn't like it.  
And they beat him.  
Then mutilated his body.  
Shot him.  
Then sunk his body  
In the Tallahatchie Rver.

Last week at a Donald Trump Rally  
A man interrupted the gathering,  
Yelling out in protest.  
As security walked the protester out of the room  
A man from the crowd  
Attacked the protester—

Hit him  
And knocked him to the ground

Later,  
When asked about hitting another person,  
The attacker said,  
“I liked it.  
He deserved it.  
The next time we see him,  
We might have to kill him.”

It seems to me  
The crowds of this Holy Week 2016  
Are not so different from that Holy Week 2000 years ago.

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And this is where the preacher in me is pained.

It would be very easy for me  
At this point to descend to my basest nature...

It would be very easy for me  
To rail against the Pilates of our day –  
The politicians (maybe politician, singular)  
Who I sense is a demagogue, a crowd pleaser, a phony.

It would be very easy for me to lambast this  
Out-of-bounds attacker from the crowd  
Who hit the protester  
And spoke of killing him...

It would be very easy for me  
To default to my own  
Partisan instincts  
And paint my words with the thin milk of religiosity...

It would be very easy for me to rail and flail  
And lament and lambast...

I hope, I pray, I can do better than that.

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You see,  
I know how the story ends.

The crowd yelled, "Crucify him."  
And they did.

Just like Jezebel and Ahab tried to do with Elijah...  
Just like the Pilgrims did with Chief Metacomet...  
Just like the white racists did with Emmett Till...  
And just like the attacker said he might do  
Last week at the presidential rally...

They killed Jesus  
On a sad hill  
On a gloomy Friday

But the story—  
Strange as it sounds—  
The story—  
Which may be  
Metaphor  
Or myth  
Or magic  
Or miracle –  
Says that on the first day  
Of the next week  
This crucified Jesus  
Was no longer dead.

As much as I do not know  
About this story,  
I know that it speaks of more than  
The resurrection of one man  
Long ago.

It speaks its meaning to us.

Life conquers death,  
The story says.

Peace wins over violence  
The story says.

Love is larger than fear,  
Resurrection reminds us.

The good of God is greater than evil,

The gospel says.

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And so  
Our opportunity,  
Our responsibility,  
As people of the good news,  
Is to find a way to live out  
That good news in our time...

To find a way to speak words of good news  
Even in times of turmoil and tumult.

We live, as poets have said,  
In the shadow of the cross.

We live, as others have said, in  
In the shadow of the lynching tree.

We also live, however uncertainly,  
In the glow of an open tomb-  
However faint that glow may be.

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How do we speak that glow  
Into brighter being?

As we watch a political season  
Flirt with violence...

As neighbors hit and spit on neighbors...

As some seek their own security and safety  
At the expense of others...

As some worship the false gods  
Of power and prestige...

How do we find the words  
To speak respect for every human being?

How do we find a vocabulary big enough  
To give voice to the common good?

They killed Jesus, in part,  
Because he said he was the Son of God.

How do *we* find words and ways big enough  
To say that Donald Trump is a child of God?  
Hillary Clinton is a daughter of God.  
Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz, John Kasich are sons of God.

That protester who interrupted Trump's rally?  
That man is a child of God.

The man who attacked him and threatened to kill him  
Is also a child of God.

How do we speak that to the world?

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Last week,  
The House of Bishops  
Of the Episcopal Church  
Wrote a statement  
Pointing out the problems we face  
In this current political climate  
And calling us all  
To a spirit of reconciliation  
And asking us not betray "our true selves."

Our United Church of Christ officers  
And Council of Conference Ministers—  
Our version of bishops, if you will—  
Happened to be meeting at the same time  
As the Episcopal Bishops.  
And so our UCC leaders unanimously and enthusiastically  
Affirmed the words from the Episcopal Church.

I appreciate and applaud the leaders  
of the UCC and the Episcopal Church  
For speaking out.

What's missing from the statement is the *how*.

How do we confront hateful rhetoric?  
How do we speak against vile behavior?  
How do we speak peace amid angry acts?

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Which bring me to another conundrum with this sermon.

What might *I* offer?

What suggestions or ideas might *I* speak that...

- a) Respect your intelligence; that...
- b) Do not violate the internal revenue odes around the separation of church and state; that...
- c) Honor the diversity that is in this room; and...
- d) Truly engage and invite you;  
rather than preach *to* you or *at* you?

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To do that, I want to quote Paul Raushenbush.

Paul is a Presbyterian minister.

He was the Religion Editor for Huffington Post.

He is now the senior vice president of Auburn Seminary in New York.

(Interestingly, Paul Raushenbush is also the great grandson

Of both the social gospel preacher of the early 1900s Walter Raushenbush

And Supreme Court Justice Loui Brandeis.)

A few days ago, Paul Raushenbush posted some words

On his Facebook page.

His words are really an invitation.

What he wrote to his Facebook friends,

I echo as an invitation to Westmorelanders...

Each one of you is beautiful. And, in big and small ways, make [the] world better. You have the power to change the world, to make it better, more sane, more just, more compassionate. I know this because I've seen many of you in action. So, I am calling upon all of you to meet the challenge that is before us -- namely, to find a way to bridge what appears to be a dangerous rise in distrust and animosity in America as evidenced [by] the violence at [political] rallies.

Many of us are involved in dialogue -- between faiths, races, nations. Can we apply our training to the battle lines that appear to be drawn? I would love to see some way of getting those supporting Trump and those protesting him in a room to listen to one another's hopes and fears, and, if nothing else, to humanize one another.

If the anger between Americans continues without you and me figuring out a way to transform it into constructive power for change, I really fear for our country and common life. I don't have the big idea yet, but I'm thinking and would love to hear anyone else's thoughts. You all give me hope. Peace, peace and more peace.

I said that I don't know how this sermon ends,  
So perhaps I will leave it there.

I don't know just how to bring various sides together.  
I don't know just what to say or do.

I invite your thoughts, your words.

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The way of Holy Week is difficult.  
The sounds of *Hosannah* turn quickly to *Crucify him*.

The way of Holy Week is marked  
With fear  
And violence  
And betrayal  
And suffering  
And death  
And doubt.

It is not easy.

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This week leads us to Easter.

Let us be on our way.

Amen.