

March 28, 2021
Passion Sunday (B)
United, Oak Park

Didn't See that Coming?

If we pause for a moment right now to consider all the things that we didn't anticipate happening over the past year, I'm sure that we would have quite a lengthy list.

We are now experiencing the second Holy Week in a row when we are not gathering for in-person worship. As shut-downs were just beginning to enter our lives during the middle of March last year, most of us probably hadn't considered that we would be away from corporate worship even for all of Holy Week and Easter then, let alone being away from it all this year as well.

United Lutheran Church had hosted a synod ordination service on the very Sunday that many congregations had begun canceling regular in-person services. That day will always be memorable for me because it was such an odd mixture of experiences. Though we at United did not meet for worship in the morning, ordaining three new candidates for pastoral ministry was deemed to be something that could not easily be delayed, so the afternoon's ordination service happened as scheduled,

but severely altered from what it might have been. Crowds of people that might otherwise have turned out from a number of area congregations to witness a special moment in the lives of their newly-called pastors didn't materialize in quite the same way. We had a number of guests that day, and Bishop Curry did ordain the three young pastors, but there weren't nearly the number of people in attendance that the synod's worship planning team had thought would fill our larger than average size sanctuary.

Since that ordination ended up being the last service in our worship space for several months, our festive red and gold banners throughout the rest of the spring lent an air of Pentecost to the room whenever I went into it. While at one point I had thought that the banners were possibly a sign that we as a congregation wouldn't be back into the space until Pentecost last year, indeed we didn't even attempt in-person services again until the middle of July—several weeks after Pentecost.

Then last September, when a number of volunteers from our congregation and the Chicago Church of Christ congregation that also uses our space, came together to take up the fraying old carpet that had

served the building for 2/3's of its entire life, we realized that replacing it wasn't going to be such a short and simple process. The carpet's removal contributed a significant layer of dust all over the place. And when tests revealed the presence of asbestos in the tiles that had been beneath the carpet all of those years, the project of renovating a floor stretched on for a number of additional months. While most of the actual work on the floor itself has been completed by now, we're still waiting for a thorough cleaning of the entire space before we can return to regular worship there—probably later this spring.

And to the list of things we didn't likely see coming, we can add the reality that within a year's start of the pandemic, millions of people have already been fully vaccinated for COVID-19; something that was unthinkable in the world of infectious disease prevention not more than a year ago.

I'm really just getting started here, of course. There are many things that many of us now see as routine that we didn't see coming. We didn't see how many of us would learn the skills of tuning in to friends

and groups by Zoom and other online platforms. And I wouldn't have imagined that I would develop some talents in the world of video editing either, since that is one way in which our midweek Lenten services have become possible.

What are the things you didn't see coming, but that now you have taken in stride? Doing most of your shopping by delivery perhaps? Cooking more at home than you would have previously? Meeting friends only out of doors rather than inside? How much has changed in just a short period of time.

Passion Sunday—this day in the church's calendar that combines Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with his death just a few days later—often has me wondering if the crowds that welcomed him so enthusiastically had any inkling about what was coming.

Throughout much of the book of Mark, Jesus even told his closest disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection, but they couldn't seem to accept it. In fact each time that Jesus told them about what was to happen, the disciples seem to have been thinking about their own

ranking within the group and how they might succeed Jesus after he was gone from their midst.

Jesus had to keep reminding the disciples that they were missing his point entirely. They shouldn't have been arguing about seats of honor and succession plans, but they should have been concerned about reaching out to serve those who were among the least of folks. So Jesus made a point of including children, those who were blind, and a poor widow who gave all that she had as examples of faith. Being great and rich could actually be a great obstacle.

So it's no wonder that at the very lowest point in the whole story that Mark recorded, Jesus was proclaimed Son of God, as we heard at the end of the passion account this morning. And it wasn't even someone who was close to Jesus who made that statement. The announcement came from a Gentile, a military official from a Roman occupying army who had the honor of saying one of the most important statements in the whole book. Quite likely he was nearby at that moment because he was someone who had a responsibility for carrying out the order to crucify Jesus in the first place. What a grand sense of irony.

Yet it's not as if anyone couldn't see this coming. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was on a colt that hadn't been ridden before. Although the garments and palm branches were laid on the ground like they might have been for a great ruler, Jesus certainly didn't fit the part. Jesus hadn't come to be seated on a throne or rule from a resplendent palace. Certainly the crowd's expectations of what he had come to do were misplaced. The one who entered Jerusalem with such great fanfare had come to die, and on a cross between two common criminals. You couldn't get much lower than that. And really, wasn't that the point? Jesus' place was right with those who had been stripped of all power and who had nothing to prove.

While we may have been more interested in turning out for the parade—such as it was with no processing or waving palms this year—we know where all of this leads. And really the destination of Christ's cross says as much about our mission and purpose as it does about anything. We are most at home when we are among those who suffer unjustly. Hosannas and songs of praise are all well and good, but God truly needs our *hands* that are open to serve wherever there is pain and a great need.