In ancient Chinese philosophy, underlying Confucianism, Taoism, and other schools of thought, there is an overriding dualistic dimension... that is, the interconnected – even interdependent – relationship between forces that seem to be opposite or contradictory: the Yin and the Yang – shadows and light – giving and receiving – masculine and feminine. Not just interconnected, in fact, these contrasts are a fundamental part of their existence. Without heat, would “cold” have meaning? Would “darkness” exist had there never been light? +++ What about love and hate... war and peace? ++++ This dualism is part of what comes out in Ecclesiastes 3... there is “a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to” harvest.” ... None of these things would make sense without their counterpart ... There is balance – a time... a season ... for each. ++++ Ecclesiastes isn’t one of the lectionary texts for Palm Sunday. I never has been. And, if you keep up with that kind of thing, you might have noticed that I follow the lectionary, almost... well... religiously. So, maybe I should start my talk with you this morning by asking and answering the question: why? ... Why – on Palm Sunday – should we be remembering there’s “a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, ... and a time to dance?” ... +++

Well, you know, we’ve been hunkered down, living one certain kind of way for a month now – social isolation... masks... gloves... loneliness... And it’s not just how we are living from moment to moment – day to day – it’s our awareness of what’s happening – the reality of the situation. The heroes at work in our hospitals, shift after shift, putting their lives on the line in an exhausting war against a relentless virus that never tires. It’s the parents caring for stir crazy kids, often while trying to work their own jobs remotely, and keep from getting sick. It’s the grocery store clerks, suddenly finding themselves battling at the frontline of a war they didn’t sign up for. And our first responders who just keep showing up – like medical helicopters on a battlefield, with bullets flying all around – swooping in to save the day, and risk it all, because someone’s got to do it. ++++++ Yes – we’ve been living one certain kind of way – and it doesn’t promise to end soon. So, we need to remember... this new normal is part of life – but it doesn’t define your life. +++ As our long season of Lent is finally winding down – a season of Lent, this year, like none other we've ever known – Ecclesiastes reminds us... in fact, with the pandemic still swirling all around... I’d say Ecclesiastes gives us permission... to celebrate. There is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” ++++++ And, if ever there were A TIME TO DANCE – this is it – Palm Sunday. +++ Or, more correctly, all of Holy Week is a condensed time when we do both... Holy Week is bookended by celebration. First, today, we celebrate the physical presence of our Savior Jesus Christ in this world – as he enters Jerusalem – in the flesh – riding a donkey. Real feet on real roads. Real sound in real ears. Real smells of a crowded city, inhaled through a real nose. God in the flesh – come to save us. ++++ At the other end of Holy Week, we celebrate Jesus Christ who overcomes this physical world. He turns darkness to light... death to life... the temporary into the eternal. +++ But... in-between these bookends – between Palm Sunday and Easter – there’s the Passion:: Jesus’ growing conflict with authorities, the heartbreaking Last Supper with his friends... arrest... a mock trial... crucifixion. +++

And it’s all frontloaded here on Palm Sunday – it’s already baked-in – all the forces that will come into play this week are already at work. ++++ Looking back at the previous chapters, we see that the Christ-movement is growing – it’s gaining strength. A large crowd is following Jesus, shouting out to him, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” In the meantime, he continues healing and teaching. ++++ There must have been whispers that a dramatic endgame was afoot. In fact, Jesus had warned his disciples how things are about to play out – but they resisted believing it. Now, Jesus’ run-ins with Pharisees and other religious leaders are becoming more and more bitter. +++ As the throng advances on Jerusalem, it’s like an unstoppable force drawing closer and closer to an immovable object: something’s got to give. ++++ ++++

This tension between opposing realities is such a part of Palm Sunday – a day when we remember not just Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but also his Passion. +++ Just looking at the text itself – the people are shouting, “Hosanna... to the... Son of David!” ++++ Let’s take a moment to look at both parts of that shout... “Hosanna” is a
cheer for a great leader – like “Hurray.” That’s the perfect thing to be shouting for someone for whom you’re waving palm branches and throwing your cloaks down. But what does it really mean besides being a cheer? It means, “Save us!” :: Like in Psalm 118, “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!” The Ancient Greek translation of “Save us!” is ὧσον – a form of the Greek word Hosanna. +++ And who are the people of Jerusalem calling to save them? The Son of God? The Christ? No – they are calling to the Son of David! Now, Jesus surely is in the line of David – and as Christians, we believe he is heir to the throne of David – but he is also so much more than that. +++ But that’s what the people shouted as Jesus entered the city. +++ You see, the Jews were expecting the Messiah to be a worldly leader – a new king like David – who would raise an army and deliver them from Roman rule. This crowd in Jerusalem really doesn’t begin to understand what Jesus is all about. They know him from rumors – from excited reports – from conjecture. They don’t know the message he’s been teaching. Remember the higher kinds of righteousness Jesus is calling for, like in the Sermon on the Mount? Remember his focus on love – even loving your enemies – on forgiveness, on social justice for the poor? Remember the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...”?

The people of Jerusalem don’t know that Jesus: “Hosanna... to the... Son of David!” ... It’s a Zionist call to retake the Promised Land. +++ And Jesus does nothing to dissuade them when he intentionally rides into the city on the donkey to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah, “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.” These are Zionist prophecies – they are a notice to the other nations of the world that the Kingdom of Israel is rising again!! +++ +++ But then – of course – in the verses immediately following today’s Palm Sunday reading – the first thing Jesus does is go to the temple and overturn the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers. He begins dismantling their religious institutions – their traditions – their power structure... – ... not building it up!! Then, after cleansing the temple of those making profits off the poor, he begins healing the blind and the lame – right there in the temple. +++ The Pharisees are the first ones to see the disconnect. After Jesus drives out the money changers and cures the sick in their temple – the Pharisees listen and hear the people still crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Of course they become angry!! So, they ask Jesus, “Do you hear what these are saying?” +++ And his answer? “Yes – I hear them – have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” +++ Jesus knows they don’t understand. He knows they are expecting something very different from him than they are getting. Jesus knows that within days they will turn on him. The people of Jerusalem will feel like he’s pulled a bait and switch scam on them. +++ That’s why they are so quick to turn on him – another reminder of the truth of Ecclesiastes, if we can write our own lines: “a time to welcome, and a time to reject; a time to cheer for life, and a time to demand death.”

So Palm Sunday is a day of contradictions. A day of celebration that, none-the-less brings together all the ingredients necessary for riots,... all the ingredients necessary to push the Pharisees and chief priests too far,... all that’s needed for an arrest, ...an official inquiry,... and a crucifixion. +++ And Jesus is the master chef who immediately begins mixing all those ingredients together. +++ +++ But before I go too far and paint Jesus as nothing more than an expert manipulator – we have to remember who the victim of these things will be. Not the Pharisees – not the people who line the streets – not the Romans, like Pontius Pilate. Jesus Christ himself is the victim. The Passion is HIS passion. The arrest, the beatings, the cross, the nails, the death – they are all his. +++ +++ And – it is through that Lonesome Valley of crucifixion – and what happens next – that Jesus Christ – the Son of GOD – defeats death and saves us all. +++ In the irony of ironies the people of Jerusalem – and we – get exactly what we beg Jesus for: “Hosanna!!” ... “Save US!!”

Palm Sunday is a day of Yin and Yang. A day when we celebrate Jesus’ presence among us and, yet, mourn for him at the same time. +++ This is the final milestone on our Lenten Wilderness Journey together – the final time we will look up together from our path, to find a sign that points the way to Easter. +++ Today’s milestone tells us – to always celebrate Jesus Christ – no matter what else is happening in your life – or happening in the world. +++ And, perhaps, in more than any other Lent you’ve ever had – you need that milestone this year. +++ In the depths of pandemic, when you fear for your life – but even more deeply you fear for your loved ones. In the depths of lonely despair. +++ In the depths of the... joyful ... sadness ... that is a hallmark of Holy Week – joyful sadness in a
week when there is a time for fear,... and a time for comfort;... a time for righteous anger and lament,... and a time to be thankful; a week when there is the mysterious darkness of death and the blinding light of eternal life granted: there is... a time to mourn,... and a time to dance... +++ Let’s Dance. +++ Dance with our own palm branches and our own shouts of Hosanna. Dance because Jesus willingly – enthusiastically – rode into Jerusalem on the lowly, humble, donkey – a donkey that was the steed of a king. Dance because he rode past cheers, continued riding through the teeth of arrest, of persecution, and death. Dance because he continued riding into resurrection – and invites you along for eternal life with him.

And that’s exactly the Good News we need right now as the horrors of this moral world ring in our ears, penetrate our hearts, and make our souls shiver. None too soon – Lent draws to an end this week. Whatever happens in the news, we rejoice that the deepest darkness is overcome by brightest of all lights. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” :: “Save us, Jesus Christ, the Son of God”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.