



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

**Forward Through the Ages**

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Next week is Easter and that is the one we might have some trouble with, we heretics, we who have believed for centuries that what Jesus taught is more important than who he was; we heretics who like the original gospel of Mark that ends without a resurrection; we who often wish we could talk about spring and new life, and bunnies and peeps and Earth Day and recycling – anything but stones rolled away and empty tombs and someone come back from the dead.

But that is next week. This week has a story we can believe in. This week has something for us. Something before the agony of the last supper and the betrayal of friends; something before the agony of hanging from a cross. No miracles here. This is a story we can dig our teeth into and hang on to – it is our kind of stuff, this story.

The story is about Palm Sunday. Maybe you know it; it is in all three of the synoptic gospels [they are Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is not in John, the weird one, unlike the other three, and written much later]. Jesus is with his disciples, with his friends, and he is going to Jerusalem for Passover. It is a turning point for him. Jesus has attracted the attention of the authorities for his message of sharing the wealth and helping the poor, for his affirmation that the least of people will be first, and those who have the most will be on the bottom. It is not a message of comfort for those in power, but is instead a challenge to them.

Rome rules. Palestine is very poor. And here comes this radical, rabble rousing charismatic teacher challenging the status quo. Imagine that – thinking that we ought to consider the poor before the wealthy, that society should care more about those without power rather than those with power, that thinking that relief will trickle down is an obscenity, that our commission is to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, comfort the widow and visit the prisoner. There is a series of lessons Jesus shares before he enters the city – that the rich ought to give away their wealth to the poor, that we should forgive others and ask for forgiveness for what we do, that we should make use of our resources and talents, that we should not parade our faith in public. Such nonsense, right?

Thank goodness we don't have to worry about those things; thank goodness our country is humble and thinks more about the poor than the wealthy, thank goodness our country doesn't parade its faith around or think we are better than others. Thank goodness we err on the side of mercy, that we are compassionate, peace loving.

Palm Sunday. In the Gospel of Luke, there is an addition to the earlier texts of Mark and Matthew. As Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem, he turns aside by himself and looks down on Jerusalem. Remember that this is his city as a Jew; this is where the temple is, where the heart of his faith is.

And he weeps; he weeps over what the city has become, a place of power and of privilege. He then enters the city, goes to the Temple and throws out the moneychangers. Imagine being outside of Sacramento, or Washington DC and weeping over what they have become, places of privilege and power, where the poor and disempowered are neglected, where they shout the name of Jesus but ignore the teachings. Imagine. Imagine throwing out the money changers – the lobbyists, maybe, the corporations who buy and sell elections, the politicians bought and sold.

Did I mention that this is a story about social justice?

For all of this, the poor of Jerusalem lay down palms before him as he rides into town on a donkey, shouting hosanna. He must have been exhausted; he believed the end was near for him; he knew that those in power would not yield their power or their privilege. The Romans had been sneering at him, calling him the King of the Jews, a group without power, dependent on the Roman puppet government, and yet he enters like a King, on a steed, but a steed showing his allegiance with the powerless.

This is a good story; this is right up our alley. Justice, equity and compassion we say. It is right there in our principles. We say that how you live matters a whole lot more than what you say you believe; we say that love and justice, and fairness and compassion – those are the tickets to salvation. This is the kind of story we can hang on to. Palm Sunday – that is our story. We don't really care whether he rose from the dead or not; we care that we create a just world, that we do what is right, that's what we care about.

I suppose Jesus had a choice. I don't think he had to go through with it all. He was a free man, not bound by fate. Just like you, just like me. He had a choice. Fully human we claim, a human only, just like you, just like me.

But I imagine him, as Luke says, turning aside for a time alone, on the Mount of Olives, and looking down at Jerusalem. A fateful time, and I bet he needed a moment to be alone and wonder about what had brought him to that point and what would happen going forward.

It was like looking at his life, at his future. Standing above Jerusalem, wondering what it had become. What a scene! It's like standing somewhere and looking down on Pasadena, or Glendale or La Canada, maybe Sierra Madre or Glendora. Maybe going up to the top of Lake Avenue looking down at Pasadena and South Pas, on into the LA Basin. Maybe it is like looking at California or even at these not very United States, and wondering – what the hell have we done? Wondering, now what? Now what do I do? Now what shall we do?

You're expecting maybe an answer?

This church lives by the work of its volunteers. We have a great staff – make no mistake – the staff here work harder than most of you know, are more dedicated than you can imagine. Take some time and thank them – every single one of them works above expectations, goes the second and third and fourth mile. They are truly great - but it is you – all of you sitting here – who do the real work of the church.

Some years ago, we had a volunteer training evening – now we have a volunteer celebration night - and one of the exercises was to line up in order of the number of years volunteering. There was a bunch of newbies – in their first year of volunteering. And at the other, and far end, the far, far end was George and Anne Moses – 40 years of being a volunteer of one kind or another here at Neighborhood. George and Anne died a couple of years ago – they were wonderful, wonderful people.

George was asked what the secret was for being a successful volunteer, and he said 'Put one foot in front of the other.' I can imagine Jesus, turning aside on the Mount of Olives, before he heads down into the battleground that was Jerusalem, taking a moment, and weeping, and saying a prayer – this is part of the prayer: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace.' And then putting one foot forward, then another, on into the future.

If you only knew what would bring you peace ... But, of course, we do know what would bring peace, and it rests in the teachings of Jesus, and it has to do with justice, and forgiveness, and equality and peace. It is not about judging or condemning or setting one group against another. It is about moving forward, not backwards, nor standing still. Putting one foot in front of the other.

So, he stood there, and then, like Moses [George Moses that is] would have whispered in Jesus' ear, he put one foot in front of another.

How about you? How about us?

Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,  
move the faithful spirits at the call divine;  
gifts in differing measure, hearts of one accord,  
manifold the service, one the sure reward.

Wider grows the kingdom, reign of love and light;  
for it we must labor, till our faith is sight.  
Prophets have proclaimed it, martyrs testified,  
poets sung its glory, heroes for it died.

Not alone we conquer, not alone we fall;  
in each loss or triumph lose or triumph all.  
Bound by God's far purpose in one living whole,  
move we on together to the shining goal.

Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,  
move the faithful spirits at the call divine.

That's the song. It was written around 1900 by Frederick Hosmer when he was minister in Berkeley, CA for the dedication of the Oakland church. Go California! One foot in front of another. Forward.

We are the faithful spirits. We here are the inheritors of a great tradition. It stretches back to Jesus and beyond, to all those who put a foot forward to stand for justice and equality and compassion. That's the shining goal. We don't ask the question of who will be saved because we know that all will be – if we do our work. We don't need a savior to redeem us because we know that is our job, and we know, just as Jesus did as he wept over Jerusalem, what would bring peace.

A little bit ago you heard about our Heritage Society – about remembering the church in your estate planning. I have done that; I urge you too as well. But the thing that will insure our future, is not that at all – what will insure the future of this beloved community is what we do now, about the steps we take now.

So, with Auden, leap. Take a risk. Put one foot in front of the other. Shout hosanna for a vision of justice and compassion, of mercy and equality. Weep over how much we have squandered what we have, and climb back on and ride on into the city. Do so and we grow in likeness to God, as Channing said. Become your faith, as Bob Karnan said.

Whitman said: hate tyrants. We are ruled by tyrants today, just as Jesus was. Tyrants who care more about power than justice, more about wealth than mercy, more about show than substance.

Rise up. Put one foot in front of the other. Forward through the ages, to the call divine.

Go get 'em.

Amen