

Earthquakes
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Erica Schemper
Palm Sunday April 3, 2022
Matthew 21:1–11

Dear friends, on this Palm Sunday, let's talk about earthquakes.

I know these are not the natural disasters of choice for people in the Midwest. But I am the daughter of a Californian, and I myself lived there for almost a decade, with my spouse and my kids, on the San Francisco Peninsula, less than two miles from the San Andreas Fault.

Seven years before we moved to California, my oldest child, Zora, was born in downtown Chicago on a day when thunderstorms were echoing off the neighboring high rises. At six weeks old, she huddled in the (flooding) basement with me for baby's first tornado warning. So, she has always known a thing or two about the midwestern varieties of natural disaster.

One day, when Zora was in 5th grade, in California, within spitting distance of the fault line, there was a huge noise, and the teacher yelled to the kids, "Earthquake! Under the desks!"

Zora piped back: "Oh, no. That's thunder!" (Zora was right, thunderstorms are so rare in northern California that the locals don't recognize the sound)

The San Francisco area's last century is profoundly shaped, of course, by the great earthquake of 1906. That earthquake shapes the history and the very layout and architecture of not just San Francisco, but towns several counties away. And, while there's no one alive still who remembers that 1906 earthquake, there's the 1989 world series earthquake, and everyone has a story (our family story is that my Aunt

Fran, during the 1989 earthquake, was the chaperone for a junior high church trip at a church camp just a few miles from the epicenter of that quake, and they got stuck at the camp for a few extra days. As a former youth pastor, I can confirm that this sort of service definitely earns you an extra star in your crown...)

The fact is, if you live in California, you are familiar with earthquakes, and you know it can happen: the solid ground could shift; that the earth quite literally could crack; and the whole world might re-form itself under your feet. It's terrifying.

The world could fall into turmoil with barely any warning.

This might be an odd thing to admit, but I've never completely understood how Palm Sunday fits in our liturgical year. Even as someone with theological training, I'm never really completely sure what it's about, and I often find myself standing with the crowd in the story, swept up in the action and excitement of the moment, but not really completely sure what we are celebrating.

And somehow, this reference to turmoil has really helped me to understand, for the first time, what it means that Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week.

Palm Sunday, Matthew tells us, is a day when the ground starts to move. When he's done describing the parade, Matthew sums up the moment: "all of Jerusalem," he says, "is in turmoil."

And by the very word he chooses in this passage, Matthew is referencing an earthquake.

See, here's one of the strange things about Matthew. On Good Friday, at the moment when Jesus dies, in Matthew's account, and only in Matthew's account, there's an earthquake. The solid ground shifts, the earth cracks, the world is re-formed.

Many commentators and theologians don't quite know what to do with this earthquake. In fact, I think most of us forget it's even in there. And I'm not sure if that's because it's such a confounding and odd little detail; or maybe because it absolutely makes sense. Of course, of course, at the moment when Jesus dies, of course the whole order of the earth falls apart.

And in his account of Palm Sunday, Matthew uses exactly the same word to describe Jerusalem when Jesus enters. The whole city is in turmoil.

What Matthew tells us is that Palm Sunday is the foreshock to Good Friday. It is the split-second warning, the first little rumble, before what we thought was solid ground shakes and gives way.

And so, today, I think we should allow ourselves to get swept into the tumultuous crowd, and begin to contemplate what will happen next, where we will go during this week.

Now, the crowd, of course, doesn't know what will happen next, and we often talk on this day about how they have the wrong idea about who Jesus is, and what Jesus will do next. And perhaps we need to not be so critical of their confusion, but simply shout Hosanna with them.

Hosanna means save us, and I wonder sometimes if we, too, don't really know what sort of salvation we're looking for. And maybe that's OK, maybe it's OK that we don't understand completely.

As I thought about this sermon, I was really struck by the fact that we are in such an odd time in history, when it really does feel like the world as we knew it shook. We've been through years of turmoil now: pandemic, politics, supply chains, racial reckoning. We keep thinking we've seen the end, that we're done: someone writes a think piece that sums up "what will change" and then there's a new wrinkle to the state

of the world. We really don't understand completely. The world feels like it just won't quit shaking.

Every year, we Christians walk through this week together. It's really a very profound thing, during Holy week, to do your best to enter the story, and whether we manage to do that by attending the sequence of worship services; or by following along the Biblical texts on our own, I think it's one of the most powerful things we can do as Christians, to live into this story, year after year, to find ourselves following along with Jesus, from this day right on through to Easter morning.

And part of why it's so profound is that we come to the story every year with our own stories. Because every year we live through, we come to the story with the lives we've lived; and every year, there's some new experience or emotion; some new wisdom, or some new question; something we've picked up, or something we've let go. Every year, we come to this story and we understand it in a new way, because it's Jesus' story...

...and it also becomes our story.

And in these years when we feel like the world has shifted, perhaps this is the year to lean into Matthew's reminder that this week is an earthquake. The solid ground shifts, the earth quite literally could crack, and the whole world might re-form itself under our feet.

It is terrifying.

But then there's what we look forward to... on the other side of the earthquake.

You see, the whole earth might re-form itself under our feet.

Because here's the thing about earthquakes, about living along a fault line...

There are the moments when the ground shifts and shakes. There is the moment coming this week when Jesus says, “It is finished.”

But beyond the moment is the thing that the earth is trying to build. Beyond the moment of Jesus’ death is the reality that God is building for the whole of creation.

Some fault lines like the San Andreas? They raise mountains. When I mentioned that I lived just a few miles from the San Andreas fault? That fault line runs right along the spine of a beautiful mountain range. In the moment when there’s shaking, that fault line is terrifying. But in the big picture, something beautiful is taking shape.

If Palm Sunday is a foreshock, an invitation to join this confused crowd in Jerusalem, and to walk with Jesus through this week, it’s an invitation to enter both the uncertainty, and the shaking... but also to be transformed.

May we walk with Jesus, confident that God’s intention is to save us, and to raise us up in ways that we can barely comprehend.

Amen.