

April 5, 2020
Celebrating and Care-mongering
Matthew 21:1-11

How are you doing? Going stir-crazy yet? I am! But here we are ... We are SO thankful, of course. For our frontline health workers faithfully doing their jobs. For store clerks and shelf-stockers, postal workers, truck drivers, and other essential people keeping on, keeping on.

And there are wonderful stories emerging of other people – singing from their balconies in Italy and Germany. Of people picking up groceries for those who are vulnerable or shut in. Of media companies making free resources available. Of people finding creative ways to offer music lessons, fitness classes, and so much more online. Or, in the case of Matt and Jodi, doing sidewalk concerts outside people’s homes (contact Matt for details).

In safe ways, these are acts of defiance, as people CHOOSE to respond to the COVID-19 virus in ways that we might not expect. Rather than fear, anger, or despair, people are defying the virus with care-mongering, with defiant joy, and with hope.

On the one hand, some of these small acts of random – and safe! – defiance are little more than symbolic. Singing “Ave Maria” from your balcony in Milan is not going to halt a virus. But it does bring hope. It builds community. It brings light into the darkness. And, in an important way, it makes us all feel a bit more human. It connects with our souls.

On the other hand, some of these random – and fairly safe – acts of defiance, such as buying groceries for a shut in and moving things online, really does make a tangible difference in the lives of people (See [Lethbridge Support Circle](#) Facebook). Real people are blessed. And those who perform these acts of kindness are blessed, too. We are writing the stories of kindness, hope, and creativity that people will talk about for years and decades to come.

Defiance is not necessarily one of those virtues we celebrate in the church, but there are times, when up against pure evil, that defiance – in safe and positive ways – is necessary and good. Note: I am absolutely NOT talking about a defiance that leads people to overcrowd spaces or flout government public health advice. I AM talking about defiance against the *spirit* of fear, hopelessness, and discouragement this *virus* can create.

The Defiance of Celebration

Jerusalem, in Jesus’ day, was in lockdown. Not a lockdown as we’re experiencing it. But people were forced to (1) accept the hard reality of Roman occupation and taxation, and (2) support the joyless, freedom-less, bigoted religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Freedom – from Roman martial law – was non-existent. Freedom – to worship God with joy and celebration – was non-existent. It was a gloomy, depressing world.

Given the situation in Jerusalem, Jesus could wring His hands and despair. He could moan and lament the evils of His time. He could become depressed. He could just give up. But Jesus deliberately – defiantly – brings celebration, joy, and worship into a bleak, joyless

world. He is the Messiah. He chooses to bring hope and joy and light into the overwhelming darkness. He is God among us. He is God with us, where we are.

Jesus starts a parade. It's not just any parade. Jesus doesn't just happen to think riding on a donkey's colt into Jerusalem might be nice for a change. He is deliberately symbolically making profound religious and political statements: the long-awaited Messiah has come.

- The prophet Zechariah writes of the Messiah, "*Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey – riding on a donkey's colt*" (Zechariah 9:9). Though Jesus had been to Jerusalem several times, this final entry into Jerusalem has special meaning. He is entering as Messiah, as King. He is fulfilling all the old prophecies, letting people know that He – God Himself – has come.
- Jesus enters Jerusalem through the east gate, also called "The Gate of Mercy." This is the gate where God's Presence had entered Jerusalem in the past and where God will come again as Messiah (Ezekiel 44:1–3). God is with them.
- The last time people spread palm branches and shouted "Hosanna!" was when Judas Maccabee, a hero of Jewish history, drove out the Greeks and rededicated the Temple. People then "*carried palm branches ... and paraded around, singing grateful praises to God*" (2 Maccabees 10:7) – a festival now known as Hanukkah. "Hosanna" is a Hebrew word literally meaning "Save now." The Messiah, God, is bringing hope and deliverance.

This is a radical act of defiance to the powers of evil of his day – not so much the political powers of Rome or religious power-that-be – but the spiritual powers of fear, hopelessness, despair, discouragement, joylessness. Into the fear and gloom, Jesus is not just bringing a message of hope. He is coming as the embodiment of God's Presence, joy, and peace.

In our circumstances, we can allow the realities of our situation to lead us into dark places. We can watch the news 24-7 and spiral downward into despair. Or we can **CHOOSE** to find hope, joy, and peace in the midst of this. If we **CHOOSE**, we can appreciate that God is with us, scattered as we are, this day. Christian faith is not just a **message** of hope; it promises the actual **reality** of hope in the personal presence of Jesus when we go through the dark valleys and challenges of life. We are not alone in this. Jesus is with each of us.

The Defiance of Definitive Action

Jesus DOES CHOOSE to **DO** something. He chooses to create hope to inspire His people.

He doesn't grab a sword, lead an army, and drive out the Roman legions with bloodshed. He doesn't punch out the chief priests, knocking them to the floor. He will overturn a couple of the tables of the more corrupt moneychangers in the Temple: a lot of coins get scattered on the floor, but no one is seriously hurt. But His anger is more symbolic than vicious.

Instead, Jesus models that we can **ACT** in peaceful – safe – appropriate ways that bring hope and healing in the world. Many of us want to **DO** something – anything – in this time. In His case, that meant inviting people to worship, celebrate, and sing.

In our context, it still may mean inviting people to worship, celebrate, and sing. For people who do not have a worship experience through their own church, feel free to invite them to be our guests for the next little while.

Some people have done exceptionally creative things in these times. Some of our music teachers are still teaching their instruments – online. A fitness instructor in southern Spain led an exercise class from a low roof in the middle of an apartment complex: residents in isolation could join from their balconies. Some of the things I’m learning from many of you ...

1. **Restricting our news watching.** I used to check several news outlets several times a day. Now I just check one twice a day. That’s it. Enough to know what’s going on, but not so much that I get sucked down into a pit.
2. **Watching uplifting things** – on TV, online, on YouTube. Watch [dancing zookeepers in Australia](#), kittens chasing points of light, sappy Christmas romance movies, worship music videos, mellow Bob Ross painting videos. Watching a disaster movie marathon may not be what we need right now. We need to laugh and feel good.
3. **Reading positive things.** If you have technology to access e-books, from the library or a virtual bookstore, choose inspirational, humour, uplifting literature. This may not be the time to binge read that 15-volume grisly murder mystery series. Check out more humorous authors like Phil Callaway or Erma Bombeck.
4. **Spending time doing things that make me feel good.** We’ve already cleaned up the garage. We’re working on the furnace room. I’m not sure what I’ll do when we’ve cleaned the whole house from top to bottom ... I might have to start over again.
5. **Getting outside** (maintaining appropriate social distancing).
6. **Connecting with positive people.** Social contact – especially with people who encourage us and build us up – is more important than ever. Call people – often. Share happy memories. Retell the good ol’ stories. Laugh.
7. **Connecting**, not only the positive people who make you laugh and feel good, but also with **some of those slightly more “difficult” people** who may be very lonely. Perhaps go through the church directory and, especially if there are people you know don’t have family, or don’t have internet, or just don’t have a lot of friends, consider calling them. Need a directory? We can help with that.
8. **Sharing positive things.** Whether in your phone calls, social media, or other ways, intentionally spreading joy and laughter. We’re bombarded with the latest doom and gloom all the time. What we need from our friends is joy and hope. Most of you who are on social media, like Facebook, seem to “get” this. Thank you.
9. If it is safe and appropriate for you, **helping out practically** by buying groceries for a shut in or finding other ways to make a tangible difference in the lives of vulnerable people (See [Lethbridge Support Circle](#) Facebook).
10. Organizing virtual “**play dates.**”
11. **Joining an online small group.** Contact Mark or me for ideas. We have a couple of new groups potentially starting up. If there is something else you would like to see us try, don’t hesitate to suggest it. We’re open to ideas.
12. Being part of our “**Prayer with the Pastor,**” Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays at 9:00 a.m. or Tuesday/Thursday afternoon Check-ins (check out our weekly

newsletter or on our homepage www.firstb.net).

13. **Doing things you've always wanted to do** you've never had time to do:

- a. One person told me they read through the whole book of Revelation in one sitting (apparently it takes 70 hours and 40 minutes to read the Bible through aloud. 52 hours and 20 minutes to read the Old Testament, and just 18 hours and 20 minutes to read the New Testament). Faster if you read silently.
- b. Pray more. Make a prayer journal to help you be more disciplined. Join us Monday, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays at 9.
- c. If you play an instrument, play your instrument more.
- d. Visit an art gallery or museum. Most of the great museums/galleries have virtual tours so you can explore them online.
- e. Learn a new language. Duolingo is free.
- f. Write that novel you always wanted to write (or at least write a limerick)
- g. Build the old puzzles you have stuck in the basement
- h. Find your old board games. Play them. Draw. Paint.
- i. Exercise more (safely). Maybe we'll all be so much fitter when this is over 😊.

Most of all, do CONNECT, CONNECT, CONNECT with people.

Attitude and Action

CHOOSE to be defiant to COVID-19 – in safe ways. Choose hope. We don't do this in our strength. We recognize that it is only through the power of God, the Holy Spirit, that we can be hopeful in these times. It's only because Jesus, the Messiah, has come into our lives – and IS in our lives – that we can be people of hope, joy, and peace.

Paul, writing from confinement in a Roman prison, says this: *"Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! ... Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:4-7). Rather than fear, anger, or despair, defy this virus with courageous joy, and infectious hope.

Choose to celebrate and worship. **Choose** to stay positive. **Choose** to become a "care-monger" – call, Skype, encourage, help, stay connected, even just stay home.

We do this, because we are people of the Messiah. The Messiah is with us. The presence and power of God is with us. His peace, power, strength, comfort, and presence are always with us. The Good News is that Jesus has come into our lives. Now, we can be His good news in the world around us.

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