

“Surrender”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on  
Sunday, March 29, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“Let my [gift](#) to the world be  
my constancy, a devotion to openness,  
my willingness to be with what is.  
Let my gift to myself be patience  
as I tend what is dense and dark.”

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“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and  
asked, ‘Who is this?’

11 The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from  
Nazareth in Galilee.’”

Human emotions, especially when the humans experiencing them  
are gathered in crowds, can be easily shifting things. When we  
gather together - in praise, in protest, in lamenting, in rejoicing,  
sometimes a big jumble of all of those things and more besides -  
there is a spirit that arises from us. We may feel a surge of power.  
We may feel a sense of comfort that so many are here with us,  
who appear to share our ideas or values or emotions. We may  
feel a sense of intimidation, being just a small part of something  
so large.

What strikes me most about these words we opened with, from  
the Gospel of Matthew, is this: the “whole city,” we are told, was

stirred by Jesus' arrival; but there are also the "crowds" that were the ones who spread the cloaks and branches before him, the "palms" this Sunday is named for.

Reading back into Chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel, what immediately precedes Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the donkey and colt is one of his miracles - the healing of a pair of blind men. Those blind men joined the throng of people who were in fact already traveling with Jesus from Galilee, and in fact they were not the first he was purported to have healed on that road, either.

What, I wonder, must the emotions have been like in that crowd? Tracing back in the text in the lead-up to that arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus is leaning hard into teaching - he is sharing parables, answering questions from the crowd. But this is a time before amplification, and they are on the move. One part of the crowd may be able to see and hear what Jesus is doing or saying, but others will come and go, will tell their neighbors what was done or said. And I think we all know what happens when information is passed by word of mouth - most of us know the game "Telephone," right? Where a single statement can barely make it around a circle with its meaning intact? How much more challenging must it be for these tales to be spread across a vast and moving crowd, and then to be carried on down through the years until the author of this text set it down - around 90 C.E., or over 50 years after the death of Jesus.

When humans tell stories over and over, when they pass them down across generations, they do it because they have a good

reason to. The story might teach a lesson or commemorate an important event. The story might spread joy or cultivate fear.

The crowds in our reading are the ones who have followed Jesus along the way - maybe out of curiosity, or belief, or disbelief, or lack of anything better to do - but the people of the city of Jerusalem, in this telling, don't know who this person is. Why are so many traveling with him? Why are they laying down their cloaks and covering the road with branches? Why on earth does one man need to ride both a donkey AND a colt!?

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*Lumbricus terrestris*, as you might have guessed, is not just the name of the poem we heard today but is the scientific name for the common earthworm.

There are times we are part of a crowd. There are times we are doing our own work, on our own time. As we've already considered, within a crowd, many things can happen - emotions can shift, messages can be crossed, misunderstandings can happen, and narratives can start to arise with uncertain connections to the truth.

Something is going to happen to Jesus, in the story laid out for us across four Gospels, all written starting many years after he died. From the time he arrives surrounded by an adoring crowd to the time mere days later when another crowd cheers as he is killed by the state, Jesus is surrounded by people constantly, and also is left alone at key times. We are told that this man cries, questions his fate, accepts what is to come, and prays for it not to. This all sounds very human to me.

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What if these words were a prayer we understood Jesus to speak? What if we considered primarily the humanity of Jesus, the man who was willing to be with what is. Jesus is recorded as knowing the work he believed he was called to do in the world - from earlier in Matthew, Chapter 20 verse 28, “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

He understood his work on earth to be that of service. He understood that to make an impression on those living under the Roman Empire, he was going to need to “give [him]self over to tunneling,” to doing the long slow work of drawing attention to the abuses of power within the boundaries of empire - and he also understood that by doing so he was risking exactly what he wound up with: a violent and agonizing death.

“No matter how desperate the situation,  
the worm does not tunnel faster  
nor burrow more.

It knows it can take decades  
to build fine soil.

To whatever is compacted,  
the worm offers its good worm work,  
quietly bringing porosity  
to what is trodden, compressed.

So often, in my rush to repair,  
I end up exhausted.

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What if I showed up in the world with the suspicion - no, the certainty - that my life was to be one of service? What if I showed up in the world with the certainty that my life was to be one of sacrifice? Would that prepare me for the very real human emotions of anxiety, doubt, and fear? Anger, defensiveness, and sorrow? What if, at some of the most stressful times of my life I was surrounded by a crowd, a huge throng of people with their own emotions, their own expectations, their own sense of whatever story I might have been publicly trying to tell? Would

that prepare me to give the gifts within me of constancy, devotion to openness, a willingness to be with what is?

That is the sense of surrender at the heart of the story of Jesus, the story that comprises the origins of Christianity, not the scant and scattered evidence we have of a Jewish teacher executed by the forces of empire more than 2000 years ago. Here was a man who understood himself to be called to live a life of service and of sacrifice, who wrestled with that idea internally (and sometimes right out loud), who nonetheless ultimately surrendered to the life before him. He ultimately gave up on his pleas to change what was coming and accepted it.

And that is *hard, hard* work to do. I think we understand this. We understand that life can change in an instant. On my left wrist, I have a tattoo that reads “Every day can be the day everything changes.” That’s intended to serve as a reminder to me that I don’t know what’s coming - for good or for ill. We know this, don’t we? We know that sometimes in life, a time will come when our world is turned utterly upside down, where a tremendous sorrow or loss might overtake us - and we also know that sometimes we will encounter an unlooked for gift, a circumstance so unexpected that will forever change our life for the better, bringing us joy, allowing us easier access to hope.

The emotions within us - whether we are a part of a crowd or feeling very alone, or sometimes both at the same time - shift with us as waves on the sea. It is much less work to let ourselves drift on the sea than to try to swim against the tide, to try to break

through the waves that move with the force of the Earth and the moon, all forces more vast than our own human strength.

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Cutting through those waves of emotion is exhausting. Repair is exhausting. The gift the poet is offering to the self - which is any and all of us - is patience.

The etymology of the word “surrender” traces back to Old French and medieval Latin, the word means “to give back, to restore, to return.” When we think about surrender, it’s important to consider what we’re giving back or returning.

The surrender that the story of Jesus embodies, the surrender that I want us to consider, is not giving up all hope. It is giving up a sense of control. It is acknowledging that there are things in this world beyond our control, and that if we can accurately name what those are, then we can give our attention to what we *can* control. Those things we can tend to that are both dense and dark. When we look at the dark days of empire surrounding us now, giving us hard echoes of the abuses we have seen humans inflict on one another over and over across history, we *cannot* afford to surrender hope, joy, or determination to continue to live

our own values...slowly, deliberately, constantly. We *can* afford to let go of - to return - to give up - those things we cannot control, that will rob us of that very hope, joy, and determination.

In the words of the Serenity Prayer, a comfort to so many in recovery and struggling with things that feel outside their control:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.”

As we move forward into this week, the holiest in the Christian calendar, let us remind ourselves that the teachings of Jesus are antithetical to the harmful work being done by white Christian Nationalists in this country, who are perverting the idea of a life of service and of sacrifice for the greater good into a grab for wealth, power, and supremacy.

Let us reflect on the gifts we can offer to the world, and to ourselves. May we do the work of constancy, devotion to openness, and a willingness to be with what is. May we grace ourselves with patience. May our work in this often dense and dark world be that of loosening, of spaciousness, of opening to new possibilities.

So may it ever be.