

THE FIVE-DAY FORECAST

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Grace Church in New York
Palm Sunday + March 28, 2021

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna!" (Mark 11:8-9)

Today is March 28th – the ninth day of spring – and thus we can declare with sure confidence that the winter of 2021 is finished. Thirty-nine inches of snow have come and gone. Daffodils are in full bloom. Magnolia trees are moments away from erupting into a riot of glorious color. Green grass is pushing up through last year's dead thatch, and drinking in today's warm rain. The time has come to put your winter coats away and wake to life again as the long shadows of Lent and winter depart. Even the pandemic is in retreat. Hosanna! Spring has sprung.

Once upon another March the residents of New York City were also celebrating the arrival of spring. On Saturday, March 10th of that year the temperature in the city was in the 50's. Not a cloud was in the sky. In Central Park people removed jackets and overcoats, took leisurely carriage rides, and pedaled bicycles. They rejoiced to be outdoors. The mercury was said to be on the rise. Weather forecasters, watching an area of low pressure moving in from the south, called for slightly warmer temperatures with rain on Sunday. They were right. It was warmer and it rained all day Sunday and into the evening. New Yorkers went to bed hearing the sound of raindrops on their windows. Spring indeed had sprung.

When it was time to arise on Monday morning, March 12th, the same people who had basked in the sun on Saturday looked out their windows on a different world – a dramatically, incoherently changed world. Overnight the temperatures had plunged into the single digits. Ten inches of snow were already on the ground. It would snow all day Monday and into Tuesday, dumping 21 inches in the city and up to five feet further north. Wind gusts of 80 mph drove the snow into drifts that were six feet high in the city, and so huge in rural areas that they would still be visible in July. What weather forecasters had failed to heed or simply didn't see was a mass of arctic air moving down from Canada. They did the best they could. You see, the year was 1888. The second storm system collided with the warm, wet storm from the south and created what they called "the Great White Hurricane." Today we know it as "the Blizzard of 1888." No one saw it coming. No one could have imagined it. It simply wasn't in the five-day forecast.

Today is not only March 28th and the ninth day of spring. Today is also Palm Sunday, when we celebrate the triumphant entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. For the Jews, the winter had been longer than anyone could remember. I refer, of course, not to the weather, but to the political, social, and theological climate in which they lived. For the past hundred years, the Jews had been an occupied people, living under the watchful eye of the Romans. But before the Romans it was always someone else. Foreign powers blew in like storm fronts, leaving behind the heavy accumulations of their occupying presence. Throughout the many centuries the Jews held onto the hope that God had promised them a deliverer – a Messiah, a savior – who would break the grip of winter. Various rebels rose and fell, claiming to be God's anointed one. A few created brief walks in the park with freedom, but they never lasted long, and their movements always succumbed to the next big storm.

Then along came Jesus of Nazareth, and many began to suspect that he might in fact be God's promised Messiah. The pieces seemed to fit. He was an heir of David, a worker of miracles, a spellbinding teacher of the law and the prophets who preached about the kingdom of God. He could even work wonders with the weather, having quieted storms and walked on water. He had developed quite a following during his three-year ministry in the countryside. Now he was coming to Jerusalem, and the politically snowbound, occupied people prepared to give him a royal welcome. The gray skies were clearing up, and the people were ready to put on a happy face. As we've heard today in the Gospel of Mark, they removed their cloaks and spread them on the path in front of Jesus. They cut leafy branches from the fields to line the road and welcome the king. They shouted, "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*" Yes indeed, spring had sprung in Jerusalem. They could declare with sure confidence that the long winter was behind them.

What the Palm Sunday crowds failed to heed, however, or simply could not see, were all the storm systems swirling about them. The frigid air mass of the religious establishment would mix with the low pressure system of the Roman occupiers. In other words, the High Priest Caiaphas and Herod would collude with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to make the sunny five-day forecast of Palm Sunday as off the mark as it could possibly be. By Friday afternoon, Jesus was on a cross rather than a throne, and he would look out on a dramatically changed crowd. As for the weather, even the sun's light failed. But it would take a third, more powerful system to mix with the others and make the perfect storm. This one we might call "the cold from within." All along the prophets had declared that the real tempest was not something that blew in from outside. Rather, it came from the fickle human heart. It came neither from north, south, east, nor west, but from within the people. You see, the Palm Sunday crowds were only fair-weather friends of Jesus. The minute they figured out that he wasn't the type of military interventionist messiah they wanted him to be, their hearts turned cold as quickly as the weather on the March weekend in 1888. How quickly our summer loves and good intentions turn into the winter of our discontent. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Did anyone see the blizzard coming? Strangely, it appears that Jesus not only saw it coming, he was counting on it. It would be the necessary backdrop for delivering the message he had to give. The storm would provide the grand opportunity for Jesus to stake his claim. What was his claim? Nothing short of this: that the great story God had been telling for centuries through Israel was coming to a climax in him. Jesus himself was indeed Israel's rightful king, but the kingdom he would inaugurate would not look like anything they'd expected.

What do I mean? Well, for one thing if you'd asked the people how they thought the Messiah should enter the city to claim his crown, most would have expected that he'd be riding in majesty upon a war horse. What better way to plow through the harsh weather of Roman and Jewish power politics? What did Jesus ride? Not a war horse, but a donkey's colt. Mark tells us how Jesus took great pains to secure the particular donkey he wanted to ride: accessing a friend inside the city, giving the disciples passwords to acquire it. Why all the focus on the donkey? Because the donkey was strangely essential to the message. The donkey had already been cast in an ancient prophetic script that Jesus was determined to follow. Hundreds of years earlier the Prophet Zechariah (9:9) had foretold how the Messiah would arrive: *Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* The donkey had been in the forecast all along. It was merely one part of the Holy Week to come that Jesus was orchestrating for us and our salvation.

How can we understand the deep mysteries of Holy Week? Sometimes doctrines, systematic theologies, sermons, and commentaries fall short, and we need stories to ignite and

exercise our sacred imaginations. The late Martin Bell was an Episcopal priest and author who in the early 1970's published a book of stories and poetry called *The Way of the Wolf*. One of the stories, called *Barrington Bunny*, became a minor Christmas classic. But to me, it has far more to do with Holy Week than Christmas. Why? Number-one: it's about a bunny, and honestly, what screams Easter more so than a bunny? Number-two: it concludes with an ending you simply don't see coming, or don't want to see coming.

Barrington is a brown, floppy eared bunny who lives alone amongst all the other animals of the forest. One especially cold and snowy Christmas Eve Barrington is the lone animal moving about because only he can hop through the deep snow, and only he has fur thick and warm enough to bear the cold. One by one he comes to the dwellings of his animal friends as they enjoy Christmas parties. Barrington wants to join the squirrels, but he can't climb the tree. Likewise, he can't join the beavers because bunnies don't swim. Finally, alone and despondent, Barrington sits down in the snow, and there he is joined by a great, mysterious silver wolf. The wolf encourages Barrington by telling him that his warm fur and ability to hop are unique gifts that enable to him to accomplish more good than he can imagine. Then the wolf leaves the bunny with a final thought: *all the animals in the forest are members of your family*.

Barrington responds by venturing into the raging blizzard to leave needed gifts at the homes of his friends: a stick to strengthen the beavers' dam, dried leaves to make the squirrels' nest warmer. With each gift he signs a little note: *From a member of your family*. On his way home he comes upon a tiny young field mouse, lost in the snow and crying that he will freeze to death. In his own words, this is how Martin Bell ends the story:

"You won't freeze," said Barrington. "I'm a bunny, and bunnies are very furry and warm. You stay right where you are, and I'll cover you up." Barrington lay on top of the little mouse and hugged him tight. The tiny fellow felt himself surrounded by warm fur. He cried for awhile, but soon, snug and warm, he fell asleep. Barrington had only two thoughts that long, cold night. First he thought, "It's good to be a bunny. Bunnies are very furry and warm." And then, when he felt the heart of the tiny mouse beneath him beating regularly, he thought, "All of the animals in the forest are my family."

Next morning, the field mice found their little boy, asleep in the snow, warm and snug beneath the furry carcass of a dead bunny. Their relief and excitement were so great that they didn't even think to question where the bunny had come from. And as for the beavers and the squirrels, they still wonder which member of their family left the little gifts for them that Christmas Eve.

After the field mice had left, Barrington's frozen body simply lay in the snow. There was no sound except that of the howling wind. And no one anywhere in the forest noticed the great silver wolf who came to stand beside that brown, lop-eared carcass. But the wolf did come. And he stood there. Without moving or saying a word. All Christmas Day. Until it was night. And then he disappeared into the forest.

Ride on! Ride on in majesty!
The angel armies of the sky
look down with sad and wondering eyes
to see the approaching sacrifice.

(Henry Hart Milman 1791-1868)