I have sort of shied away from talking about this whole covid business in my sermons because, despite what many clergy seem to think, I don’t know any more about it than you do, maybe less. But I want to slightly break with that tradition today, not to offer any advice on the nature of aerosol virus spread, HVAC air exchanges per hour or the hermeneutic of why church shutdowns are required by the demands of love, rather I want to compare the way Jesus enters Jerusalem today and the way we entered corona-tide last year.

In today’s Gospel we have what is known as the triumphal entry and it comes more or less at the end of Jesus’ three-year ministry on earth. By this point the disciples have seen water changed into wine, the dead raised and demons expelled. They have been there when massive crowds came to hear what Jesus had to say and seen those same people healed of their infirmities. And so, for them, it would have seemed natural to have been met by the scene we have today where we read, “Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” The past three years have been pointing towards this moment. And while we aren’t told exactly what the disciples were thinking it is fairly easy to presume; they believed that by Jesus entering Jerusalem in such a way God’s kingdom would soon be restored and that Jesus would assume some sort of earthly kingship along with the expulsion of the Romans. But of course, that is not what happened. In just a few days Jesus will not be crowned a king but rather crowned with thorns and crucified on a hill just outside of the city. The disciples’ plans and reality turned out to be two very different things.

Similarly, a little over a year ago we all had a fair number of plans that depended on the world working in a certain way. On March 10th of 2020 I dropped some shirts off at the dry-cleaners and asked for them to be folded rather than hung so that it would be easier for me to pack because Amy and I were going to France in a few weeks. And I am sure all of you have stories like this, stories about how the assumed trajectory of your life changed in a moment. And this leads to the question of what are we to do when everything changes so suddenly? Do we go along or do we, in the words of Dylan Thomas, rage, rage against the dying of the light? As you might have guessed the answers aren’t always clear cut. In this past year there has been much advice and many orders telling us what we were supposed to do and most of it involved doing things differently from what we had done before. I imagine that prior to this year none of us kept a mask in our car or stood six-feet away from someone while waiting in line. It will probably be years before comprehensive studies are done to show the efficacy of the mitigation measures that were taken but in the short term most people changed their behavior because they believed that what they were doing would make a difference. They believed that by going along with the larger society and the mandates of politicians they were doing the right thing.

But what about going along with the larger society and politicians in the context of Palm Sunday where changing behavior meant shouting “hosannah in the highest” on Sunday and “crucify him” on Thursday? With the lockdowns we know that what got us to change our behavior was a virus that produced a global pandemic, but what changed in today’s story? What were the new facts that altered everyone’s behavior? We get a few hints in our text from Mark. Shortly after Jesus arrival he tells a parable and we read, “And they [the temple officials] tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude.” After this there are a few scenes with the pharisees trying to entrap Jesus and then we read, “It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him; for they said, ‘Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people.’” So far what we have is the the chief priests and scribes wanting to arrest Jesus but fear the people because they are still on Jesus’ side. As a result, they devise a way to do it without causing a ruckus. Now you know what happens next, Judas betrays Jesus, Jesus gets arrested, is questioned before the high priest and is then taken to Pilate so that he can be crucified. And it is in the moment when this plan to kill Jesus is fully realized that everything changes for the crowds. Pilate doesn’t think Jesus has done much wrong and so he tries to release him but the crowd turns down the offer and asks for the criminal Barabbas to be released instead. Pilate then asks what to do about Jesus and the crowd yells, “Crucify him.” The only hint we are given about what changed their mind is when the text says, “But the chief priests stirred up the crowd.” That’s it. That’s all it took according to the Gospel, a little stirring up. But I think it might have been pretty easy work because of one more thing that changed and that was the way the wind was blowing – not literally but figuratively. On Sunday Jesus was a big deal, so people wanted to be part of the excitement. But on Friday morning he was in trouble, so the crowds and even many of the disciples were trying to pretend they had never heard of this Jesus guy. Human nature wants to be with a winner; they want to back the strong horse and on Friday morning Jesus does not look very strong. If you want a more modern comparison think of Milwaukee Bucks paraphernalia and its proliferation since Giannis Antetokounmpo (a de koom po) became their small forward versus the time when that position was held by Tim Breaux – winning gets you a lot of friends.

This morning, in the Gospel, there was no worldwide pandemic to change people’s behavior. Rather it was simply that the momentum was now against Jesus. That’s all. He was the same as he had been when he arrived in Jerusalem on Sunday, it’s just that following him on Friday was a lot riskier. And this brings up a good question on which to reflect and that question is when is it okay to give something up? When is it okay to change our behavior because of some new bit of information? Today the crowd is quite obviously wrong in shouting crucify. But what about when our change is less stark? For a moment think of all the things we changed this past year because of Covid. We gave up visiting loved ones, going on vacation, eating at restaurants, attending sporting events, going to church and so on. Was all of this okay, or did some of it go too far? Should I have been so willing to follow the diocese in shutting down church? There are no simple answers but put in broad terms something that asks us to go against the will of God needs to resisted. Yelling crucify is obviously bad but I also think withholding the eucharist from all of you for months on end was also bad. We are coming out of a time of great tribulation where we were forcibly kept from receiving the body and blood of Christ and forcibly prevented from joining the great assembly and so my hope in all of this is that this Easter will be more real. Just as all looked lost on Good Friday my hope is that the spiritual bleakness of the past year will turn to the joy of Easter so that we may be God’s own now and forevermore.