



**“March Madness”**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***March 16, 2008  
Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)***

It's that time of year again when tensions mount, crowds go wild, and almost anything can happen. Commentators and reporters fill the airwaves and sports pages with “bracketology.” All the preparation, inspiration, and perspiration that has contribute to mounting successes converge and crescendo, and make this a ver intense time of year across the country. Reputations are won and lost. Records are made and broken. One team wins it all, and the rest go home “losers.” What time is it? Sports fans know—it's “March Madness.”

Brent Musburger, a popular sportscaster for CBS and ESPN, first used the phrase, “March Madness,” to describe the NCAA basketball tournament back in 1982, but the phrase was originally coined by a sportswriter in 1939, in reference to the frenzy surrounding the quest for the Illinois high school boys' state basketball championship.

I was never an elite athlete, and my alma mater never advanced to the Sweet Sixteen, but March Madness has become one of my favorite sporting seasons of the year.

The upside of Lent coming so early this year, for me, is that the last two teams to be selected for the NCAA playoffs won't be determined until 2 p.m. today, and "the Big Dance," involving "Sweet Sixteen," won't be played until well after Easter this year.

Much as I enjoy college basketball and this time of year, sports fans and news junkies across America realize that the usual hysteria associated with March Madness has been subdued by the senseless murder of the student body president and a trustee of UNC Chapel Hill, Eve Carson, just ten days ago.<sup>1</sup>

Police and university officials announced this past week that two young men have been arrested and charged with the murder of the 22-year old pre-med student.

If the police records on the young men who were charged in the case are any indication of the motive, it seems that Eve's murder was likely intertwined with auto theft and, it was recently learned, that one of the thieves, and the suspected shooter had, just a month ago, murder of a Duke University graduate student Abhijit Mahato<sup>2</sup> from India, during a break in and home robbery.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88008149>

<sup>2</sup> Abeejeet Ma ha toe

One of the more poignant and hopeful moments in the whole drama surrounding Eve's murder was the way that the basketball coaches from UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke handled her slaying.

Rather than marching on with the madness of basketball, both coaches called press conferences last week and commented on the senseless murder of this woman who had dedicated her life to the service of others.

Right there, in the middle of March Madness, two Division 1 college basketball coaches reminded America that sometimes we just have to stop in our tracks, notice the horror in our world, grieve great losses, reflect on what matters most, ponder why such misery would be unleashed, and how we might create a world beyond this type of violence.

## II

The thought occurred to me this week that the first Palm Sunday and Holy Week were filled with a similar kind of drama and pathos as this year's March Madness.

On that first Palm Sunday, people gathered in Jerusalem, the nation's capital, from all over the world. They had come to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover, like they did every year. Homes, shops, and streets teemed with excite-

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nowpublic.com/world/eve-carson-murder-suspect-tied-duke-slaying>

ment and overflowed with visitors in much the same way that tournament towns fill up with raucous basketball fans visiting from other cities and towns across the nation.

Into this frenetic mess rode a man named Jesus, who was what sports casters might call “a real Cinderella story.” For like Cinderella, he was as unlikely a candidate to be celebrated, much less reign victorious over the weeks ahead, as anyone.

As Jesus passed through Jerusalem, the crowd parted while onlookers waved palms, shouted hosannas, and paved the streets with their garments. It was the kind of hoopla that we rarely associate with anyone but athletes in our society today.

Despite the fanfare, there was at least for Jesus an underlying awareness that in just a few days the party would be over, and these loyal fans would become fair-weather friends, and deny and desert him once and for all.

So Mathew’s word choices to describe the scene are apt. He writes in Mt. 21:10, “...[T]he whole city was in turmoil...” *Turmoil*, in English means, “a state of ex-

treme confusion or agitation.”<sup>4</sup> The Greek word for turmoil, *seiō*, conveys the mood even better—*seiō*—which means “shaken.”<sup>5</sup>

The lives of residents of and visitors to Jerusalem that first Holy Week were shaken by the events that would happen just a few days later, somewhat like the UNC and Duke campuses were shaken by the deaths of their two students: Eve Carson and Abhijit Mahato.<sup>6</sup>

### III

This far from the East Coast, not many of us are likely Tarheels or Blue Devils, but I suspect that we don’t need to be students or alums of either school to resonate with the turmoil that has been felt recently on these campuses.

We only need to have had one experience in life that has affected us similarly. We only need to have had one experience that stopped us in our tracks, caused us to reassess what our lives were about, and question how we we’re spending our time, money—indeed, our very lives.

Maybe those occasions have been happy times for us like falling in love—long after we thought love had passed us by—or giving birth to a child—after having

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=turmoil>

<sup>5</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew in Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Nashville: John Knox, 1993), p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/holnus/001200803151756.htm>

lost a pregnancy or two, or discovering our true vocation after waking up to the fact that the professional path that we had originally chosen had not led to the fulfillment that we had expected.

Maybe those occasions that led us to pause, the way the UNC and Duke campuses have, and the way that the first followers of Jesus did, were happy occasions, but more than likely those riveting experiences that have given us pause have been more negative situations, like being seriously injured in an automobile accident, discovering that our child was an addict, learning of a spouse or lover's betrayal, falling victim to a random act of violence, or receiving discouraging news from our physician.

Any or all or other occasions like these may have led us to re-examine our lives. They may have caused us to question what we believe and value, and perhaps they have even inspired us to assess our actions and make permanent changes in our behavior or life direction.

Whatever the case may be for us, Matthew's account of Palm Sunday reminds us that we are not the first to be moved, even changed, by such turmoil. It also reminds us that Christ not only lived through, but survived beyond, this turmoil.

And because of Christ's experience, because of his example, and because of his triumph over the worst that the world can do to anyone, we can trust in the prom-

ises that he made long ago—to keep solidarity with us in the midst of our turmoil, and to lead us to a victory that the world can't give or take away. Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory beyond suffering and death. Amen.