

April 5, 2020

Sharing the Story...Palm Sunday

Shepherd's Grace Church

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'⁴This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ 'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' (Matthew 21: 1-11)

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever!

² Let Israel say,
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'

¹⁸ The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever. (Psalms 118: 1-2, 18-29)

Welcome to Lent! We are nearing the end of our journey...or are we? Certainly, as we gather today and as we gather apart, this promises to be one of the most unusual Holy Weeks we have ever celebrated. Ordinarily, we would be anticipating certain traditions this week. One of those, the procession of Palms, we did celebrate, but in a very different. Instead of our children waving palms and laughing as we paraded through the sanctuary, instead of us singing and waving palm branches from our seats, we watched as the shadows showed the way up the path and into Jerusalem...our own Jerusalem, our own private city of peace.

Other traditions this week would have begun even last night as we gathered to celebrate the seder, the meal God commands us to eat in anticipation of a

freedom we cannot yet imagine. These other traditions would include Holy Week worship services with others from different and varied faith traditions. These services would have been at different locations and with different preachers and musicians providing new insight into the end of a journey we have so long anticipated.

Other traditions would have included preparation for Holy Thursday and Good Friday services at Shepherd's Grace. They would have included the prayer vigil, one of my favorite traditions; an evening of continuous prayer from night until the glorious dawn of resurrection and Easter Sunday.

These are just a few of the traditions of the week that is unlike any other. They will be missed but perhaps they can be replaced with singular traditions that will be etched into our minds in singular and special ways. Perhaps this year's palm procession will yield to next year's return to normal. Perhaps this year's on line services will yield to next year's return to normal. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps...but perhaps we should not get too far ahead of ourselves.

For now, Palm Sunday is at hand and Easter is approaching. For many, this is an annual reality. Those who just attend the Sunday services of Holy Week have a difficult time imagining what happened that transformed the triumphal entry into a deadly disaster and then a triumphal entry all in a week where they went about their lives in "business as usual fashion." Perhaps some of you are entering our story from this perspective. Perhaps you are unaware of the tensions building even at this very moment of the story.

When they came near Jerusalem. Some might want to share the story from this point. They might remember that Jesus said in just the last chapter of Matthew's gospel that he must go to Jerusalem where the leaders of the Jews would plot against him, and hand him over to the Romans to be crucified.(Matt. 20: 19) If you choose to enter from this point, remember the message of Lazarus from last week.

Many, maybe even you have come to believe in Jesus because of what he did in raising Lazarus from the dead. The Jewish leaders were concerned that Jesus was becoming so popular that the so many Jews might come to believe in Him that the leaders would lose their power. Because of their fear, they began to plot to kill him to retain their power. The high priest, Caiaphas, said that sometimes it is better for one person to die than for the whole nation to suffer.

He said this because he was afraid that Jesus and his popularity might foment revolt against the Romans who were clearly more powerful than the Jews. He was afraid that the power the Jewish leadership enjoyed would be destroyed

by a rebel uprising that would be quickly suppressed and yet, the revolt would change the balance of power between the Jewish leadership and the Roman Empire.

They came near Jerusalem knowing that all this was going on. So why enter the city? Why go into Jerusalem and subject yourself to the perils planned by evil men for the purpose of their own gain? The answer lies in scripture. In 2Kings 22, it is commanded that Passover be celebrated in Jerusalem. It is one of three Holy Festivals that are commanded to be celebrated there. All the people are to go up and celebrate there so that they can remember that on that night, God passed over them and brought death to the Egyptians who had enslaved them and brought freedom and life to the Hebrew people. (Ex. 12)

They came near Jerusalem because they were commanded to come near to Jerusalem. Jesus knew the dangers...even his disciples knew the dangers but in this instance, unlike the instance where Jesus was called to return to Judea to save Lazarus, no one protested. No one tried to stop Him. They knew the risks, but sometimes there are events in life that are bigger than the risks.

If you chose to enter the story with Jesus this morning as one going to Jerusalem, perhaps you chose to enter because you recognize that sometimes there are things bigger than risk. Certainly we are living in a time right now that reminds us there are things bigger than risk.

Today, the risk is not to go, but to stay. The routine is to go. The routine is to go to work, to the store, to the movies, to church. It is easy, it is normal to do these things and many are questioning why we cannot. Look at the parking lots at Wal-mart. They are packed! People are out shopping and visiting and doing the things they have always done because that is what they have always done.

The reality is that things are not now what they have always been. Things are different in our world today. Normal is a threat. Normal is not the way and we are invited to recognize this and alter our behavior so that one day, we will be able to return to our normal.

We cannot now, nor will we ever see that which is threatening us in the current reality. We cannot now, nor will we ever comprehend the depth of the threat which we face. The risk in knowing these facts is in ignoring them, in failing to take precautions to combat them.

Today, if you choose to enter the story with Jesus from this point, we must enter our own Jerusalem. We must recognize the risks of coming together and

commit together to staying apart. Jesus and the disciples and all the Jewish people went "up to Jerusalem" because of God's command to them that they do so.

We, all of us, every person on the planet must choose to separate from one another for a time for the very same reason. God commands us to do so. Yes, I said God commands us to do so. And "How exactly does God command us," you ask.

In Deuteronomy 6 we are told to "Love the Lord our God with all our heart and strength and mind." In Leviticus 19 we are told to "Love our neighbor as our self." Jesus puts both of these things together for us in a simple and single command. In Matthew, and in Luke he says we are to "Love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind and Love our neighbor as we love ourselves." He says, the whole of the law is summed up in this way.

God's command to Jesus and the Jewish people is to go to Jerusalem and remember. God's command to us today is to stay. To stay in our homes not as a sense of confinement, but as a strategy of love.

If you choose to enter the story with Jesus this morning, if you choose to come near to Jerusalem, you must recognize that you do so as a command to "Love Your Neighbor." You choose to do so because you are beginning to understand that it is necessary for us to risk our normal right now so others can survive to enjoy life later.

Jesus knew he was risking everything as he came near to Jerusalem. He made that risk so that we might have life and have it abundantly. (John 10: 10) We must also risk everything in this moment so others, people we do not know in ways we cannot understand might have life and a future with family and friends. We risk so their future might be filled with hope. We pray that others will join us in that risk in order that we may all find that hope with family and friends and people of faith in the future. As the Psalmist says, "This is a day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

If you choose to enter the story this morning with Jesus near Jerusalem, you must know that this entry was calculated. This entry was planned. Jesus called two of his disciples and sent them into the village just ahead of them. There, he said, "You will find two animals tied. Untie them and bring them to me."

Certainly, there was a sense of planning as Matthew let the story unfold. Jesus would have had to communicate with someone in order to insure that the animals were there when he wanted them to be there. I mean, he

couldn't just make them appear at will. Well, maybe he could. He is the Lord of creation after all and all things come into being because of him. Still, the more logical conclusion is that Jesus made an arrangement. Not everything has to be a miracle right.

Yet, if you choose to enter the story with Jesus this morning as he plans to travel into Jerusalem, you choose to engage in the full sense of the plan. You see, the plan was set in place more than seven hundred years before it was executed. It was set in place with the prophet Zechariah who foretold the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem, "a king coming riding on a donkey and even more, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

I am confident in Jesus as the master planner. He plans not only in his day, but before his day so that everything can come to pass at exactly the right moment. The Lord's attention to detail this morning is intended to give confidence to us even in times of uncertainty. Seven hundred years before, the prophet tells of the triumphal entry and provides the detail. The word of the Lord breaks in early to prepare for the precise moment when it will be needed.

The word is needed on this morning, this Palm Sunday to inspire those who are gathered. Jesus had walked more than thirty miles from Galilee to the place on the Mount of Olives where these animals were brought to him. He had not tired out. He had not become fatigued. No! He had planned. The last two miles were to be a procession into a difficult situation.

To make the procession, he had to plan for the procession. He had to look ahead and he did so, even before he broke into time. If you choose to enter the story with Jesus this morning, perhaps you will recognize that if Jesus broke into time seven hundred years before this moment, maybe...just maybe he has taken time to break into time to orchestrate events that are unfolding for us today.

How might Jesus be inviting us to join the procession of faith this morning? How might Jesus be inviting us to spread our cloaks and palm branches before him this morning? Might he be reminding us as we worship together and apart that God is in control and ultimately will bring us to the place where we understand what God is doing to remind us what it means for God to be in control.

Up to this point, Jesus has walked this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself. Nobody else could walk it for him...he had to walk it by himself.

If you have joined our live broadcast of this message this morning, you know that I told you that a few years ago, I was part of an album production with Donnie Huffman. You heard me say that my part was really small and that Donnie's part was really large. Still I had a part.

Today, I am reminded that in the context of world events, the part that I play, the part we play is really very small, and the part that God plays is very large. Still I am reminded that we are joined in our part by the one who walked this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself so we could walk it with him later. He broke into time to remind us of God's love so that when we come to time, we come to him.

A few years before I was involved in the project with Donnie, I was involved in an opportunity to travel to some of the places where Jesus walked. I love to run and every morning I was in the Holy Land, I got up before the rest of my group to run. Here is some of my recollection of the runs I enjoyed in a yesterday that was a long time ago but still lives in the immediacy of my mind.

I have run down the path to the sea of Galilee

I have run the banks of Jordan, tasted salt from the dead sea.

I have run along the seashores of waters spread by God

Jesus walked this lonesome valley and with me He's always trod

I have run down a mountain to a place called Philippi

I have run past the gates of hell with Jesus at my side

I have run through the meadows with the blessed and the meek

Jesus walked this lonesome valley but He's always run with me

I have run down the paths from the Mount of Olivet

I have run on the roads where the palms are waving yet

I have run up the steps to Pilate's palace throne

Jesus walked this lonesome valley but I've never run alone

I have run the Delorosa and my tears have stained the path
I have run through the garden where our savior prayed his last
I have run the road to calvary my own cross did I bear

Jesus walked this lonesome valley, but he never left me there

Jesus walked this lonesome valley, had to walk it by himself

Nobody else could walk it for him, he had to walk it by himself

If you choose to enter the story this morning from your own place in the journey...if you choose to join from your own faith story, then maybe we can together remember where we have been and where Jesus has met us. The places are not always places where he has walked but sometimes are places of deep and intense memory for us...for us alone or for us together. If you choose to join me this morning in a journey together, then lay your cloak on the ground ahead of him. Cut branches and lay them behind him. Join me and walk with him! Sing Hosannas! Shout praises! Give Glory to God!

But know this! If you choose to walk down this path from Olivet you will see things that will terrify you. You will see things Jesus knew would be there but they will be a surprise for you and me. As you walk down this path, you will look to the right and see Calvary. You will see the crosses in the distance and you will know the death and despair that is only a short distance from you.

It is for this reason that if you joined us this morning for the live broadcast, we led you past the wall of crosses in our house. These crosses are a reminder, not only of the amazing grace God gives us as His death gives new life to us, but also of the conscious choice Jesus makes to take this journey down into the valley of the shadow of death.

If you choose to walk this path, to enter the story from this point, you will walk by the garden at Gethsemene where Jesus was betrayed. As he road down that path on that day, he knew one of them would betray him. As Donnie said in the song, "Lord is it I?" If you choose to walk this path this morning, know that it is you, it is me, it is all of us who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But if you choose to enter the story from here, know that our betrayal is not the end. Know that there is more. Know that there is the opportunity to witness to His Lordship as we share with others. You see, much will have changed for you and for me if we choose to make this journey...to enter this story with Jesus. We will proclaim him as the prophet but we will know him as more.

This week, the week that lies just ahead of us is an opportunity to know him more. If you choose, we will know him as prophet, yes but also as King. This One is the Messiah, and blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen!