

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Good Morning Church Family, it's good to be together this morning. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Today is, of course, Palm Sunday, as Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, so too are we entering the Holy Week. Entering into the story of Jesus's passion, the story of his life, death and resurrection.

In the many sermons that I've listened to in my life, and this now my 4th Easter season of my own preaching, I've noticed there is a tendency to tell the story of Jesus's last days always through the lens of Easter. Because we KNOW the ending of the story, it's hard not to jump ahead, hard not to rush into the good news of Jesus' resurrection. On the one hand, I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing. Easter is the pinnacle of the Christian faith, our entire belief system and way of viewing the world hinges on that, so it makes sense that everything is viewed in the light of Easter.

Yet, at the same time, I think this approach can keep me, can keep all us, from really entering into the story. Of really seeing each piece of the narrative, Palm Sunday, the Passion, Good Friday, as it would have been seen and felt by the followers of Jesus at the time. In the world of theatre, meaning plays, there is a concept called the "suspension of disbelief." It's the idea that when audience members are seeing a play, which they know isn't real, understanding that the people on stage are actors, they're wearing costumes and what they are watching isn't "real" they're choosing to let go of

understanding and immerse themselves in the story. Choosing to believe that they're really inside a farmhouse in Prince Edward Island, and the little girl with red braids really is Anne of Green Gables. You are "suspending your belief" in reality to become part of the story. Now, I suffer from a condition called "overactive suspension of disbelief", very grave, very serious. I get so easily and emotionally wrapped up in plays, in books, and movies that sometimes I can't take it. Taylor and I were watching a TV series some years ago that was very emotionally heavy, it was also critically acclaimed, and made all kinds of brilliant commentary on society, and I really wanted to watch it, so Taylor persuaded me. But, with the disclaimer that he would tell me when something bad was about to happen so I could cover my eyes or I could ask at any time, "Is this person okay? Do they die in this season?" Because I just couldn't handle watching, unless I knew the ending. I couldn't sit in the uncomfortableness of it.

Perhaps the Church does the same during Holy Week. We know the ending, so it's easier to take in the hard parts of the story, or we rush through the week, not really taking in the story, because Sunday is coming. I remember my mom posting on facebook a Lovely Sunrise and Empty Tomb picture with golden letters proclaiming, "He is Risen!", but she posted this on like...the Wednesday before Easter and I said to her, "Mom, it's Wednesday. Jesus hasn't even died yet!" She didn't appreciate that much.

My point here is that as we journey through Holy Week together this year, I'd like to try for myself and for us together to sit with the story, to take each piece one at a time, just as the disciples would have. To imagine how this would all feel, would all look if we

didn't know the ending. So in my sermon today, my reflection on Maundy Thursday and then Easter morning, I'm going to be playing a bit of a long game, and I hope you're okay with joining me in that.

Today's scripture, which Roger read for us this morning, takes place at the beginning of Matthew chapter 21. Now, Jesus, for some time, has been telling the disciples that he will go down to Jerusalem, and he's going to die by crucifixion and that on the third day he will be raised. He tells them in chapter 16, 17 and 20 of Matthew. This shouldn't be news to the disciples. In Matthew 16, when Jesus predicts his death, Peter, who really has no filter in what he says or does, shouts at Jesus, "No way! That must never happen!" and Jesus rebukes Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." In Matthew 17, he predicts his death and it says the disciples were "greatly distressed." And it happens again in Matthew 20, as they're on their journey to Jerusalem. Now, I would imagine there is quite a bit of uneasiness amongst some of the disciples, like when you try to persuade a friend to stay the night, rather than drive home in a snowstorm. Jesus, we don't have to go to Jerusalem, but they would also remember Jesus' strong response to Peter. The emotional tone is probably nervous, foreboding, but surely Jesus couldn't have meant what he said. What sort of person would willingly go to an unsafe place, go where death could find them?

As they're coming close to the edge of the city of Jerusalem, Jesus tells two of the disciples to head into the village and there they find a donkey and colt tied up, and they

are to take them and bring them back. If anyone says, Hey! What are you doing with those animals!?” all they need to say is that “The Master has need of them,” and they won’t stop you. And this all happens exactly as Jesus says it will.

And as they’re coming down from the mountain, they throw their cloaks on the donkey, and Jesus rides in on the donkey and the colt, a processional coming into the city. Jesus at the front, and the disciples following. And as he’s coming into the city a large crowd is forming, Jesus fame has spread throughout the region, and the passover festival is happening, so there’s likely extra people, extra emotional energy. Soon the crowds are throwing their cloaks on the ground, snatching palm branches from the trees, and rolling out the red carpet, so to speak. The crowds are running in front of him shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” The anxiety that the disciples may have been feeling as they entered Jerusalem, is melting away in the energy of this crowd. How could Jesus’ death be imminent when the people love him this much!? Surely, Jesus is mistaken, or was speaking in metaphors. The passage goes on to say that the whole city was in turmoil; unsettled as people ask who the man on the donkey is, and they’re told this is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.

In verses 4 and 5 of this chapter, Matthew writes, “This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on colt, the foal of a donkey. Matthew here is making reference to a Zechariah 9:9. This prophecy would have been

known to the disciples and perhaps to some of the people in the crowd too. This was Jesus' moment as the triumphant king! They could see prophecy being fulfilled with their own eyes. Surely, Jesus could see it too, right?

Matthew's reference to the prophecy in Zachariah underscores the reality that there are different cultural forces, powers, understandings and narratives at play here. It's like when we try to recall an event or happening from our childhood. The story I remember will likely be different from the one my brother or sister tell, the version that my parents recall. Because we all come with our own biases, our own limited understandings.

To understand the feelings and enter into the story of Palm Sunday, it helps to recognize those forces.

First, there is the cultural force that is the Power of Rome. At the time that Jesus lived, Jerusalem was ruled and occupied by Rome. The city still had a "Jewish" identity, but it was made clear to the residents just who was in charge. Palm Sunday is taking place right around the time of the Passover festival. This was the Jewish festival that commemorates God's rescue of Israel from another powerful nation, Egypt. This was a deeply meaningful time for the Jewish people, and also a time when Roman officials would have really been doubling down on their show of power. You can have your festival, but don't get any wild ideas about independence. You can celebrate your religion, but let's remember who is really in charge. Rome had emerged victorious from a civil war some 30 years previously, thanks to the wildly violent and unstable ruler

named Julius Caesar. After Caesar's death, his adopted son Octavian, became the Roman ruler and declared Caesar a god. Thus making Octavian the "son of the God". By the time Jesus is riding into Jerusalem, Octavian's son Tiberius is the Roman Ruler. Coins were made on Tiberius' portrait on them. On the front, around Tiberius's portrait, it says, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus." On the back is Tiberius portrayed, and described, as "chief priest." So, for Jesus to be welcomed in the way that he was praised as the Son of David, the famed King of Israel, to receive the type of welcome that was usually reserved for Roman officials, coming to show off their power on war horse, Jesus is making a pretty intense political statement.

The second cultural force that is at play in this scene is that of the Jewish people. The nation of Israel is weary, weary of occupation, domination, and foreign power. They are the children of YHWH, the ones whose descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore. NT Wright describes Israel's desire like this, "As far back as we can trace their ancient scriptures, the Jewish people had believed that their story was going somewhere, that it had an appointed goal. Despite many setbacks and disappointments, their god would make sure they reached the goal at last. The stories they told were not simply stories of small beginnings, sad times at present, and glorious days to come. They were more specific, more complex, dense with detail and heavy with hope.

Their theme came to full flower in the story of the Exodus, when Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert to their Promised Land. The Jews lived in the hope that it would happen again. The tyrants

would do their worst, and God would deliver them. Understand the Exodus and you understand a good deal about Judaism - and about Jesus. Jesus chose Passover, the great national Exodus-festival, to make his crucial move. The long story of Israel must finally confront the long story of Rome. This is no time to be out on the sea in an open boat. Or riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.”

So it's in these HUGE cultural stories that Jesus is riding this donkey, entering for the Passover festival. It would be a bit like a tinderbox, right? Something is bound to happen. Israel desperately wants freedom. And they want Jesus to give it to them. Rome desperately wants to suppress a Jewish uprising, and are willing to collude with the Jewish religious leaders to make it happen. The festival is happening. The city is crowded. It feels like gathering thunder clouds on a thickly humid July day.

And into this perfect storm, rides Jesus, the son of God. Coming not in might and power, but in humility, in love for the vulnerable. The unstoppable force that is at work in this story, one that perhaps only Jesus recognizes, is God. God's desire to reconcile all of creation, Jew and Gentle, back to him. God's will to establish a kingdom, a culture that is not tied to any sense of nationalism, or power over one another, but built on mutual submission to God and love of neighbor. Jesus' willingness to lay down his own life. Jesus's desperate desire to let the cup of suffering pass from him. Jesus could see the whole story; from beginning to end when he rode into Jerusalem. God was in this, even when nobody else could see it.

All these forces-Rome, Israel, God- are coming to bear at this passover festival in Jerusalem. Who will yield to which force is the great question as we enter Holy Week.

The question that I would like us to consider is how are the forces in your life clashing or not with God's? Which story feels most real? Which force is sweeping you off your feet in this time and place in your life? Are you longing for something different? Safe within the status quo? Where is the force of God working its way into places in your life, like water, seeping into the fine cracks of a stone? Who is Jesus, riding into Jerusalem, to you, here and now?

We'll pick up again on these ideas and this story at our Maundy Thursday service.

Let's Pray.