

## “Holy Week”

*Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40*

*Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022*

One of my mentors as I was preparing for the pastorate was Rev. Steve Eason at Myers Park Presbyterian Church. As part of my duties there, I participated in worship on Palm Sunday. Rev. Eason is a great preacher and I was excited to hear the Word he'd share with us. Amazingly, he announced he'd be giving the same sermon he'd delivered the year before. He went on to say that it was *mostly* same sermon he'd preached every Palm Sunday for the last 15 years.

I was a bit apprehensive at first. But then I heard the sermon. All Rev. Eason did was recount and reflect upon the events of Holy Week. As I listened to the narrative, I realized it was something FAR MORE than a sermon. Truth be told, with all the work I'd been doing for the church at the time, had it NOT been for that retelling, I might never have taken the time to hear the entire drama of Holy Week. And I wonder, how many of us might normally miss hearing the story this year? We're such busy people, aren't we? We may pick up bits and pieces of Christ's journey to the Cross, but the chances are we'd overlook most of the story, jumping straight from the Hosannas to "He is Risen." And leaping from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunrise leaves us with an absence of Christ's passion. Sure, some of us will be here on Thursday night to hear more, *I do hope all of us will be here, I can't really imagine many good reasons why we wouldn't.* But going from "God Save Us" to "God Saves US" makes it too easy for us to miss the connection between Christ's suffering and our salvation. The Cross is the means to our redemption. And through it we're reminded that *God's ways aren't our ways.*

In order to fulfill his divine purpose, Christ begins his trek to Jerusalem. Luke's Gospel records it this way – "*Then the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" And so, the Passion begins.

Our Gospel reading from Luke this morning shows that Jesus Christ came into Jerusalem on a Sunday. Great thought was given towards this entry. He sends two of His disciples ahead of Him with *specific instructions.* And that's just it you see. He knew what He was doing. Always did. Always will.

On Sunday, Jesus follows the typical path taken by pilgrims coming towards Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover; but His entrance is anything BUT routine. He descends from the Mount of Olives into the city. There were better ways for a conquering King to enter the city. Coming down a hill would've made an attacking army easy prey. Jesus *is* coming into Jerusalem as a hero but He sets about doing it in a different way. Not with swords or slings but with the sacrifice of His own life. *God's ways aren't our ways, are they?*

Gone from Luke's Gospel are the crowds with the palm leaves. Matthew noted that point. Here, as Luke recalls the moment of Christ's entry into the city, it's His own disciples who cry out... praising God joyfully with a loud voice. But notice why they're doing that. They cry out jubilantly because of all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" The Scripture here shows us that what had the disciples so filled with energy and excitement were the "deeds of power" Christ had been doing and the expectation of Him becoming King by ridding Israel of the Roman scourge.

No wonder they all depart when his life slips away on a Cross made crimson by His blood. According to the world, dead men tell no tales, and they also do no more work and no more deeds of power – so we understand why all the disciples fled. By their estimation, there wouldn't be any power from God to protect them.

How little they understood. *How little WE understand.* [PAUSE]

But then, according to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus leaves Jerusalem as quickly as He's entered it. I wonder if that's when the murmuring started. I wonder if that's when the people who cried out Hosanna began to be suspicious about this Jesus. His rapid departure surely wouldn't have been what they wanted. The very same people who laud Jesus Christ as He enters to fulfill THEIR expectations, scream out against Him when He fulfills God's plan, not theirs. And I wonder - don't we sometimes become suspicious of the Lord's power when God doesn't do things OUR WAY? But His ways, well, they aren't our ways, are they?

On Monday morning, Jesus comes back into the city, returning from Bethany. It's on a Monday that Jesus Christ upends the money changers in the Temple, taking aim at a corrupt practice and a hard-hearted people.

The people gathered there that day must've wondered "What King is this?" Jesus, their HERO, their SAVIOR, is taking aim at THEM and NOT the Romans. He's messing up the status quo and He isn't touching a single hair on a single head of a single Roman centurion. Needless to say, the people don't like it. They don't like Jesus' behavior. He's messing with the WAY THINGS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE DONE, after all. And, as we all know from experience, *so few of us like it when the boat gets rocked*, even for the right reasons.

*But God's ways, aren't our ways.* Sometimes, even the systems and rituals meant to glorify God become perverted by our sinful desire to master control over our surroundings. The money changers are one example. If we look closely enough, there are sure to be others, even today. [PAUSE]

It's on that same Monday that the chief priests and scribes begin plotting to kill Jesus Christ. But even with all that anger aimed right at Him, Jesus doesn't back down. In fact, scriptures show Him continuing to teach openly in the Temple. You see, Jesus had something to do. He'd known His duty since the foundations of the earth. Now, as his time drew to a close, He wasn't going to let a little resistance get in His way. So, He keeps teaching, even as the specter of His own death looms over Him like a dark cloud. Amazingly, at that point, He ups the ante, so to speak. All the parables He teaches in the Temple take aim at the people in power there. The very ones He knows are plotting to kill Him. If we knew people were conspiring to kill us for our faith, wouldn't we leave? But then again, God's ways aren't our ways, are they?

Perhaps tired from the day's events, Christ returns Monday night and sleeps again in Bethany. He doesn't rest long. On Tuesday, Christ begins anew and returns to Jerusalem. But this time, *traps* lie in wait for Him. The people He's angered through His words and actions have crafted some questions. Questions designed to snare Him in heresy. The chief priests and scribes ask Him about taxes, wondering if it is lawful to pay money to the emperor. It sounds innocent, but at its core is a desire to incriminate Jesus.

But Jesus knows their ruse. He's known about it for generations. He slips by their trap. So too does Jesus evade the next deceitful query. They ask Him "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" Again, Jesus speaks truthfully and *yet isn't snared by their trap.*

It's likely to have been Tuesday when Christ sat by the temple treasury and saw pilgrims bring their offerings to God. A widow comes. She offers a humble mite. A pittance by all accounts but in an instant, she becomes a picture of Godly devotion remembered forever. Imagine that – God favors the poor and scorns the rich. *God's ways aren't our ways, that's for sure.*

There aren't direct records of what happened on Wednesday. At least none mentioned specifically. But it's likely to have been Wednesday evening when Mary pours costly perfume all over Jesus' feet. Do you remember the reactions of the people in the room with them? They're shocked. Such a dreadful waste, they think. But Jesus lauds the action. Turns out, devoting time and energy and resources to Him isn't such a bad thing, even when they conflict with the sensibilities of this world.

If things were hot for Jesus on Tuesday in Jerusalem, it was boiling over come Thursday morning. But with Thursday came the need to prepare for the Passover. So, Jesus sends out the disciples to look for that upper room we see so vividly in our mind's eye. Following Jewish tradition, the disciples would've selected a blemish-free lamb. By three o'clock, its blood would have been spilled at the Temple altar. Think for a moment about that. Just like that lamb, soon Jesus' blood would be spilt on the earth to atone for OUR sins. [PAUSE]

When they got to the upper room to eat, the custom would've been to have a lowly servant wash their feet. *But Christ changes everything.* "*So, the last will be first, and the first will be last,*" He's told them. *God's ways aren't our ways.*

And He shows them what that looks like. Taking a washcloth and getting down on His knees, Jesus, their King, their Messiah, does the unthinkable by custom of the time. ***He washes their feet.*** Do you remember what the Apostles do as they sit at the table with the Lord who washed their feet that day? They bicker with one another. They fight over which of them would be regarded as the greatest. The Disciples try to rank themselves like a NCAA tournament bracket. What a contrast. Jesus faithfully humbling Himself. The Disciples filled with pride, exalting themselves. How well we understand the Disciples ways!

It's at that meal Jesus Christ institutes the Lord's Table. He lifts up the bread and cup and says exactly what He's come to do. Judas gets up from that Holy Communion to "do what he must do." He betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Money and treachery go hand in hand, don't they? [PAUSE]

Thursday night after the meal, the eleven remaining Disciples sing a hymn and leave the table. They walk across the small Kedron brook. Together, they ascend the Mount of Olives and enter a garden of Olive Trees known as Gethsemane. There, Jesus issues a mandate as the sun sets. It's the reason we call Thursday Maundy. It comes from the Latin word for mandate. The direction Christ gives them is this – "*that they love one another as He has loves them.*" Having issued His command, He leads Peter, James and John, deeper into the Garden. He tells them to keep watch. Knowing what's soon to happen, Jesus Christ wants to pray. He instructs the three to keep awake as he prays to God the Father.

Peter and James and John, they fall asleep. We all fall asleep at our posts awaiting Jesus, don't we? [PAUSE]

The Scriptures record Gethsemane being a place of deep struggle for Jesus. It's where His humanity groans against His destiny. But Christ is faithful. "*My Father,*" He says, "*if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.*" Being faithful to God is NEVER easy. [PAUSE]

Jesus is arrested in the Garden early the next morning before sunrise on a Friday. Led by the authorities is none other than Judas. He walks up to Christ and kisses Him, a sign to the police that it's Jesus. Betrayal is always such an intimate thing. [PAUSE]

Soon, Jesus is taken to the house of the high priest, Caiaphas. Defying their own laws and authority, the priests and scribes try Jesus. It's a mock trial filled with falsehoods. Even though He tells them nothing but the truth, His accusers perceive it as heresy. Caiaphas even goes so far as to tear up His clothes, a ritual sign done in the presence of blasphemy. ***How quickly we all reject the truth, calling it a lie.***

Soon, a rooster crows and with it comes Peter's denial. A young maid of the high priest identifies Peter with the Nazarene. She's claims Him to be a disciple of Christ. He says simply "I don't know what you are talking about." "I DO NOT KNOW THE MAN." How soon we all turn from God when confronted with calamity. [PAUSE]

The Jewish authorities want Jesus DEAD, however at the time, they didn't have power over life and death. But the Romans did. But only if it the charges were POLITICAL. So, they turn Jesus over to the Romans, telling the Romans lies. The priests accuse Jesus of three things: that's He's been perverting the nation, that Christ promotes the forbidding of paying taxes to Caesar and that Christ claims Himself King over even the Roman empire. Three charges raised against Jesus. Three FALSE charges.

Ah, the ways of this world we get too well, don't we? Do whatever it takes to get what WE want done. A lie here or there is just sometimes the price you pay to get what you want. Those ways we completely understand.

So, Pontius Pilate questions Jesus about them. The Scriptures suggest that Pilate wants a way out of executing Jesus. He knows Jesus is innocent. So, Pilate offers a choice to the crowd. Save Jesus or save Barabbas, a thief. The crowd, no doubt filled with some of the "Hosanna" shouters from Monday, scream for Pilate to spare Barabbas. "Crucify HIM!" they shout. So, Pilate releases the thief and turns Jesus Christ over to the executioners. He washes his hands. How quickly we all like to forget our sin. [PASUE]

Christ is stripped. He's beaten. A scarlet robe and a crown of thorns are put upon His head. They mock Him. How little they knew. They spit of Him, flog Him and lead Him away to be crucified. The power of Rome loomed so large that morning. Where's that empire NOW?

Its 9:00am Friday morning on a day we call good. The only reason it's good is because of what God accomplished. God took the very worst humanity could serve up and used that evil to bring about everlasting good. So, Jesus is led to a place  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile outside of the city. It's called Golgotha, the Latin word for it is Calvary. Golgotha was a garbage dump. A place of execution. And that's what happens. Jesus is nailed to a cross and raised up to die between two common thieves.

He hung there, forsaken by His friends, from 9am to 3pm when His life slipped away, crying out with a loud voice, He says "*Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.*" He breathes His last breath.

Even to the end, Christ loves us. Through 6 long hours of agony, Jesus Christ showed that His love for us will never stop. Not even after 6 long hours of dying does that adoration cease. Not even when the pain is delivered by the hands of the people, He's acting to save will God's love towards us die.

Holy Week reminds us that God's love will not be run off, even when we make the WORST choices.

God's ways really aren't our ways, are they?

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.