

## *“Holy Week”*

*Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11*

April 2, 2023

One of my mentors as I was preparing to be a pastor was Rev. Steve Eason at Myers Park Presbyterian Church. As part of my duties at that church, I participated in worship on Palm Sunday my first year there. Rev. Eason was a gifted preacher and I was excited to hear the Word he would share with us that day. Amazingly, he stepped up to the pulpit and announced he'd be giving the exact same sermon he'd delivered the year before. He went on to say that it was the exact same sermon he'd preached every Palm Sunday for the last 15 years. At first, I was a bit apprehensive. I thought, "C'mon, he's phoning it in on one of the most significant Sundays of the year." But then I heard the sermon. He said all he was going to do was recount the events in Jesus' life during this week so many years ago. As I listened to the narrative of Holy Week, 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?

So today I continue my own tradition of simply telling the story of Christ's final week, Holy Week, on Palm Sunday. I am thankful to Rev. Eason for the idea and hope to retell the events half as well as he. Our Gospel passage from Matthew 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.

And now, the time spoken of in prophecy arrives. 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.

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. Notice the crowds putting down their palm leaves. Keep in mind, this wasn't done for every pilgrim making their way towards the Temple for Passover. These palm leaves were strewn because they were expecting a deliverer. As they laid their branches in His path, these people had an expectation of what Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would do. They wanted Him to free them from their Roman oppressors. But Christ comes into the city not so much to upset the Roman empire as to do something far, far greater.

It's ironic that as the people lift up the words "Hosanna" "God save us" they're saying the right thing but their understanding of what they cry out for is woefully incomplete. How often do we do that, I wonder? You see, Jesus is acting to save them, to save us, but not from the Romans. He's here to save them, to save us, from something far worse. 2023 years later, the mighty Roman Empire is nothing, relics gathering dust in museums. But our salvation from sin and death is everlasting. Hosanna indeed!

But then Jesus leaves Jerusalem as quickly as He's entered it. Jesus comes into the Temple, looks around and departs. Without so much as a triumphal speech, Christ returns to Bethany to spend the night. 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. After all, this rapid departure wouldn't have been what they wanted. A coward turning tail and leaving? They'll turn on Him...we know it. The very same people who laud Jesus Christ as He enters to fulfill THEIR expectations, scream out against Him when He instead fulfills God's plan, not theirs. Don't we ALL do that sometimes?

On Monday morning, Jesus comes back into the city, returning from Bethany. It's Monday, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, that Jesus Christ upends the money changers in the Temple, taking aim at a corrupt practice and a hard-hearted people. "What kind of Messiah is this?" they must've wondered. Here Jesus is going after them and NOT the Romans. He's messing up their economic system. He's messing up the status quo. He isn't touching a single hair on the head of a 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.

So, it's on a 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.

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 lies a desire to incriminate Jesus. But Jesus knows of 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*. You know, I thought a lot about those questioners this past week. Here they are trying their best to stifle God's will, but to no avail. All of that effort leaves them nothing more than a historic legacy of futility. God's will, Christ's will be done no matter what! Don't we also struggle with that sometimes? [PAUSE] 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. But think about all those other people. All those other offerings NOT singled out by Christ *because they weren't sacrificial*. Christ saw those offerings too, just as He sees ours. [PAUSE] 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. Do you recall who raises the loudest objection to the expense of the perfume? Who wails the loudest at the cost of devotion to Jesus Christ? It's none other than Judas. It's the betrayer of Christ who's *most* upset with the cost of discipleship. [PAUSE] 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. 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. 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. ***He washes their feet***. Do you remember what the apostles do as they sit at Table with the Lord that day? They bicker with one another. How much like them we are. [PAUSE] It's at that meal Jesus Christ institutes the Lord's Table that we'll celebrate this morning. He lifts up the bread and cup and says exactly what He's come to do. And He tells them exactly what they're to do to celebrate His actions. Judas, sadly, gets up from that Holy Communion to "do what He must do." He betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Money and treachery so often go hand in hand, don't they?

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 three of them, 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 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, isn't it? [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, they perceive it as blasphemy. 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 when confronted with calamity. [PAUSE] The Jewish authorities want Jesus DEAD. However, under Roman rule, 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 them 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. All of them FALSE charges. 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, pointing towards Jesus. So, Pilate releases the thief and turns Jesus Christ over to the executioners. He washes his hands. How quickly we all like to forget even our passive participation in sin. [PASUE]

Christ is stripped, beaten. A scarlet robe and a crown of thorns are put upon His head. They're mocking Him. How little they knew. They spit on Him, flog Him and lead Him away to be crucified. The power of Rome loomed so large that morning. Where's that empire NOW? Dead and gone. But our Lord? Our Lord is eternal. It's 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.

May we **never** forget all that happened this coming week so many years ago. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.