**Weekend of Sunday, March 24, 2024**

**Palm Sunday/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a**

**Second Reading: Romans 4:13-25**

**Processional Gospel Reading: Mark 11:1-11**

**Sermon Title: *“The Long Two Miles”***

**Theme**

*This week, the center of the church’s year, is one of striking contrasts: Jesus rides into Jerusalem surrounded by shouts of glory, only to be left alone to die on the cross, abandoned by even his closest friends. Mark’s gospel presents Jesus in his complete human vulnerability: agitated, grieved, scared, forsaken. Though we lament Christ’s suffering and all human suffering, we also expect God’s salvation: in the wine and bread, Jesus promises that his death will mark a new covenant with all people. We enter this holy week thirsty for the completion of God’s astonishing work.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a**

 4The Lord God has given me
  the tongue of a teacher,
 that I may know how to sustain
  the weary with a word.
 Morning by morning he wakens—
  wakens my ear
  to listen as those who are taught.
 5The Lord God has opened my ear,
  and I was not rebellious,
  I did not turn backward.
 6I gave my back to those who struck me,
  and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
 I did not hide my face
  from insult and spitting.

 7The Lord God helps me;
  therefore I have not been disgraced;
 therefore I have set my face like flint,
  and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
  8he who vindicates me is near.
 Who will contend with me?
  Let us stand up together.
 Who are my adversaries?
  Let them confront me.
 9aIt is the Lord God who helps me;
  who will declare me guilty?

**Second Reading: Philippians 2:5-11**

5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 6who, though he was in the form of God,
  did not regard equality with God
  as something to be exploited,
 7but emptied himself,
  taking the form of a slave,
  being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
  8he humbled himself
  and became obedient to the point of death—
  even death on a cross.

 9Therefore God also highly exalted him
  and gave him the name
  that is above every name,
 10so that at the name of Jesus
  every knee should bend,
  in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 11and every tongue should confess
  that Jesus Christ is Lord,
  to the glory of God the Father.

**Processional Gospel: Mark 11:1-11**

1When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [Jesus] sent two of his disciples 2and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” 4They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” 6They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
 “Hosanna!
  Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
  10Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
 Hosanna in the highest heaven!”
 11Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

**Sermon**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today, on Palm Sunday, we gather together to commemorate the beginning of what was arguably Jesus’s last journey - a journey that I hope all of us will walk with him and will take us from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the foot of the cross.

Today, as we look to the Gospel of Mark, we witness Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem amid shouts of "Hosanna!" Within these verses lies a powerful message of humility, surrender, and the transformative power of Christ's love. As we reflect on this momentous occasion, let us open our hearts to the invitation of Jesus to walk alongside him on “The Long Two Miles” of sacred road that leads to Calvary.

Picture of Lazarus’s tomb

Jesus has been in Bethany at the home of his friends, Lazarus, whom he raised from the dead just days before, and Lazarus’s sisters, Martha and Mary. Although I did not visit the tomb of Lazarus, it is preserved and has been venerated since the third century.

Map Bethany to Jerusalem

Today, Bethany is known as Al-Eizariya, Arabic for the “place of Lazarus.” The town is located on the southeastern slope of the [Mount of Olives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_of_Olives), less than 2 miles from [Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem).

As Jesus and his disciples approach Bethphage and the crest of the Mount of Olives, Jesus sends two of his disciples ahead to fetch a colt for him to ride. Fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, Jesus enters Jerusalem in humble majesty, riding on a young donkey—an image that symbolizes peace and humility rather than earthly pomp and power. But, are these the words the people wanted to describe their messiah?

The people, the common Jews have also made pilgrimage to Jerusalem from all over the known world for the festival of the Passover, second in importance only to Yom Kippur. The holy city and capital of Judaism has swollen to many times its normal size. Jesus has been out and about preaching and teaching and performing signs and miracles for about three years and has developed quite a reputation. That he was going to be in Jerusalem this Passover created quite a buzz. “Could he be our long-awaited messiah?” they asked each other.

Temple Mount

As Jesus crested the top of the hill and looked down over the Mount of Olives, he could look across the Kidron Valley and see the Temple Mount and the Temple. The crowds hear that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem and go out to meet him. They gather along the road and respond with joy and exaltation, spreading their cloaks and leafy branches on the road before Jesus, and shouting,

9"Hosanna!  Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

At this moment, the people are willing to accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, fulfilling God's promise to redeem His people. But to be honest, the donkey doesn’t seem very messiah-like.

The title of today's sermon, "The Long Two Miles," refers to the distance from Bethany at the top of the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem—a journey that Jesus and his disciples undertook on that first Palm Sunday. While the physical distance may have been relatively short, the significance of this journey cannot be overstated. It was a journey marked by anticipation, expectation, and the dawning realization of the true nature of Jesus' mission and messiahship.

But beyond the physical distance, "The Long Two Miles" also symbolizes the spiritual journey that each of us is called to undertake as followers of Christ. It is a journey of discipleship—a journey that requires patience, perseverance, and unwavering faithfulness. I hope that you took advantage of the season of Lent to take on spiritual disciplines that have prepared you, because just as Jesus walked the road to Jerusalem with purpose and resolve, so we also are called to walk alongside him, embracing the challenges and joys that come with following in his footsteps.

At the heart of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem lies a profound message of humility. Unlike earthly kings who wield power and authority through force and coercion, Jesus comes as a humble servant, riding on a donkey—a symbol of peace and humility. His kingdom is not of this world, but a kingdom marked by righteousness, justice, and sacrificial love.

Reflecting on Jesus' example of humility, we are reminded of the call to humble ourselves before God and one another. In a world that often values self-promotion and self-aggrandizement, Jesus' model of humility stands as a radical alternative—a call to embrace a posture of servanthood and selflessness in our relationships and interactions with others.

However, this is not the message that Jesus’s contemporaries want to hear. In just days they will turn on him in the most vicious unimaginable ways possible.

Another key aspect of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is his unwavering commitment to surrender to the will of God. Despite the acclaim and adulation of the crowds, Jesus knows that the road ahead will be difficult and fraught with suffering, even to the point of death. Yet, he willingly submits himself to the Father's plan, trusting in His wisdom and sovereignty even in the face of uncertainty and adversity.

As we journey through life, we are called to emulate Jesus' example of surrender and trust in God's providence. Like Jesus, we may encounter trials and tribulations along the way, but we can take comfort in the knowledge that God is always with us, guiding and sustaining us through every season of life. In moments of doubt or fear, may we echo the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”

As we accompany Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, we cannot overlook the shadow of the cross that looms ever larger on the horizon. Allow me to remind you:

* On Monday he fiercely cleansed the Temple, which infuriated the priests, who responded by plotting his death.
* On Tuesday, he went back to the Temple where he was confronted by the same angry priests, who demanded to know where he got the authority to do the things he does.
* On Wednesday, while back at the Temple, Jesus prophesied that the Temple would be destroyed.
* And on Thursday, at the celebration of the Passover, he instituted the Last Supper, the same ritual meal we will celebrate in a few moments that set the stage for his betrayal.

But back on Sunday, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem is just the beginning of Jesus' journey towards Calvary—a journey that will culminate in his sacrificial death on the cross for the sins of the world. The shouts of "Hosanna!" will soon give way to cries of "Crucify him!"

Yet, it is precisely in the shadow of the cross that we find the true meaning of Jesus's triumphal entry. For it is through his death and resurrection that we find forgiveness, redemption, and newness of life. And it is in the shadow of the cross that Jesus beckons us to leave our

* guilt and regret,
* our mistakes and upsets,
* our failures and our fiascos.

They are no longer ours. We have to let them go because to cling to them is to deny the sacrifice of Christ. The burden *has* been lifted off our shoulders and Jesus *has* taken them with him to the cross, where he died for the forgiveness of our sins, past, present, and future.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Gospel means “Good News.” But it isn’t *Good News* if you are still hanging on to your junk wracked with guilt over what you’ve done or left undone. There is nothing you can do that can separate you from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus. The foot of the cross beckons you to humble yourself, acknowledge that you can’t handle it on your own, surrender to Jesus, and feel the transformative power of Christ’s love.

*pause*

Well, pastor, that *is* Good News! Is there anything we should do in thankful response? I’m so glad you asked.

As we reflect on the significance of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, let us consider how we can apply its lessons to our own lives:

Humility: Let us cultivate a spirit of humility in our relationships and interactions with others, following Jesus's example of servant leadership and selflessness.

Surrender: May we surrender ourselves wholeheartedly to the will of God, trusting in His wisdom and providence even when the road ahead seems uncertain or daunting.

Following Christ: As we journey through life, let us walk in the footsteps of Jesus, embracing the challenges and joys that come with being his disciples.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we prepare to journey with Jesus through Holy Week, may we be inspired by his example of humility, surrender, and sacrificial love. Let us walk alongside him on "The Long Two Miles," knowing that in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we find the promise of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. May we, like the crowds who greeted Jesus with shouts of "Hosanna!" on that first Palm Sunday, welcome him into our hearts and lives with open arms, ready to embrace the transformative power of his love. Amen.

**Prayer**

God of salvation, our Lord Jesus entered his passion to raise us to life. In this holiest of weeks, help us to find sweet comfort walking with Him to the foot of the cross, so that we may be raised in a resurrection like his and dwell forever in you, Eternal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen