

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a
Second Reading: Philippians 2:5-11
Gospel Reading: John 12:12-19
Sermon Title: “*Living in this Awkward Tension*”

Theme

Text

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord —
the King of Israel!"

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

Sermon

Welcome to Palm Sunday. Oh, how I wish you were here and we could form our little procession and wave our palms and sing that glorious song together, “All Glory Laud and Honor, to you redeemer, king.”

I’ve probably told you this before, but Palm Sunday is one of my oldest childhood memories, because of the palms and doing something different like marching in a little parade. I don’t remember Lent or Holy Week services from my childhood, but I do remember Palm Sunday. I feel bad that our congregation’s children are going to miss that this year.

Don’t you just hate it when the Gospel passage for the day begins, “The next day …” and you don’t know what happened the day before that was worth noting? I do. So allow me to fix that for you.

Our “Journey with Jesus Through John” will continue this week and next, but there are a couple of gaps in the way the readings are prescribed for each Sunday. For example, when we left off last weekend, we were in John 11 ending at the 45th verse. As you recall, Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead and I concluded the sermon by saying that the next thing John covered after that amazing sign and wondrous miracle was the convening of the Sanhedrin to plot Jesus’ execution.

Yea, I know it is both ironic and confounding to me. Confounding because he just did an amazing thing. If he had that kind of power I would have chosen to believe in him, concluding he must be who he said he was. And ironic because John wrote that the leaders of the Jews concluded another course of action was called for.

Listen to this:

John 11:47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

So get this, Jesus had proven that he had the power to do all kinds of amazing signs and miracles and *this was a problem* because it might just mess up their tense but copasetic relationship with the Romans, *whom the Jews hated!*

Jesus, in the meantime, went to Ephraim for a while and we have no record of what he did while he was there. And then on his way to Jerusalem, he stopped at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha and they hosted a dinner for him. Well, that was the least they could do right? After all, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead!

While at the dinner party, Lazarus, Jesus, and his disciples reclined – that’s how the men ate back then, and Martha, of course, served the meal. Mary?

John 12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

About this, Judas Iscariot said it was a waste, to which John wrote reminding us that Judas was the betrayer, even though it had not yet happened, and that he was a thief, a redaction of history, I would say. Jesus on the other hand said,

John 12:7b "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Then John wrote,

⁹When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Have you heard the expression, “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”? Well, it applies here. We know the concerns about Jesus are more complex than John wrote here, but ‘we need to kill that man who raises people from the dead’ was the conclusion of the Sanhedrin? ‘And while we’re at it, we’ll kill the man he raised from the dead too!’ Yea, just think about that for a moment.

It is after that, that our passage for today begins with, “The next day…”

The Passover was near, and the city of Jerusalem had swollen to many times its usual size. The whole city was a buzz about Jesus. By this time he had been all

over Palestine and he was very well known as a preacher and teacher and performer of signs and miracles. Even those who had never seen him with their own eyes had heard about him. And the buzz was, ‘Could he be? Is he? He couldn’t be the long-awaited Messiah of God, could he?’”

And so when word got out that he was coming into the city, all the people, thousands of people went out to greet him. And that’s where the pageantry comes in that we love to mimic on this day.

As Jesus approached, riding on the colt of a donkey, they took palm branches and waved them, and threw their cloaks on the path for him, and shouted,

^{13b}“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!”

Oh, it must have been fantastic! The whole city was full of hope and joy. “God is going to save us!”

What? You’re not feeling it? Let’s face it, I’m not really translating the joy of the day, am I. And let’s face it, this Palm Sunday is just weird! And Holy Week is going to be a weird Holy Week too.

It’s Palm Sunday and I and Erik are the only ones in the sanctuary. Mike has taken down the purple Lenten banners and put out the palms, but they are merely a backdrop for the making of this video.

This Thursday will be Holy Thursday and I will intentionally focus on Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and his last great commandment instead of the institution of the Lord’s Supper since we can’t share in it. We will still conclude the service with the stripping of the altar, although the vessels and elements of Holy Communion will not be out; not even for show.

We traditionally celebrate Good Friday with a choral presentation, but this year, with no choir, we will save the reading of the Passion that usually concludes the Palm Sunday service, for Good Friday. It’s the best we can do, and I hope it will be good enough for you.

But for now, on Palm Sunday, we are left with this awkwardness.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Are we supposed to cheer and march around the dining room tables of our homes in solidarity with the hopefulness of the Jews? Cheer that God revealed in Jesus Christ *has* saved us?

What we need today is for God revealed in Jesus Christ *to come and save us now!* There is a silent invisible enemy out there that wants to kill us!

Maybe what we need right now is to take this time when we have nothing else to do, to live in this awkward tension. Maybe that will cause us to ponder what a world without hope, and forgiveness, and resurrection would be like.

Oh, we know how the story turns out, nothing can change that. But today as we live out the “stay at home order” we need to conclude that God revealed in Jesus Christ *was and is* the only source of our hope, and forgiveness, and resurrection. And for that he is worthy of our prayers and praise.

One day our churches will re-open, and what a joyous resurrection that will be!

Prayer

Giving God, on this day we celebrate the day that your son and our Lord Jesus, set into motion the irreversible final leg of his journey to the cross. This week, as we continue to stay at home as ordered, let us find the time meditate on you great love demonstrated through his passion. For it is only through him that we have hope, forgiveness, and resurrection. It is in his name we pray. Amen