

“For the Love of the King”
Lenten Sermon Series
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
Palm Sunday – April 5, 2020
(Mk. 11:1-11)

Introduction.

There are many events, even in our lifetime, to which we could point and say, “That changed the world.” Think of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, or the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy in the 1960s. Think of Neil Armstrong being the first person to walk on the surface of the moon, or the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11. Many people are saying that the pandemic we are currently in has changed the world, and we wonder if things will ever be the same again. These are events that have changed the world forever.

However, of all the events over the course of time, there was one week in particular which changed the world more than any other, even more than Covid-19. It was the week we Christians now call Holy, and it began with a triumphant celebration on Palm Sunday. Jesus is the King of kings, but He wasn’t the sort of king people expected. And in the end He disappointed them all, and He didn’t fulfil their expectations. It’s one of the reasons Jesus was killed.

How is God using the current events of our day to get your attention, and what does He want you to learn about loving and following Him in the midst of the confusion and disappointment of the coronavirus pandemic? Let’s take a look at this passage and see how it relates.

I. The Plan of Jesus.

It was the time of Passover, and the whole city of Jerusalem was filled with people. They were pilgrims who had traveled from all over the world to celebrate one of the most sacred feasts in the Jewish year. The city was packed, and they didn’t have any concern with social distancing. Jesus could not have chosen a more dramatic moment to tell the world who He really was. He came into a city that was surging with people, and they were keyed up with high religious expectations.

We’re told that Jesus instructed two of His disciples to go to the villages of Bethphage and Bethany, and they would find the colt of a donkey tied there. The disciples were to untie the animal and bring it to Jesus. If anyone asked them, the disciples were simply to reply, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here

shortly.” It would be sort of a password to the owner of the donkey. The disciples did as they were told, and they found the animal just as Jesus said.

I wonder if the disciples had any doubts about the task Christ gave them. I wonder if they thought, “We could get into trouble if someone thinks we’re stealing this donkey.” I know I have questions at times about what God is up to in my life, and I wonder if He really knows what He’s doing on occasion when He asks me to step out in faith. I’ve had some of those questions during this pandemic, and perhaps you have too. But, like these disciples, we have to trust that God has a good plan, and as odd as I may think the task is that God has given me to do and as uncomfortable as I may be with the assignment at times, I’ve got to believe God will bring good out of whatever He’s asked of me. These disciples did as Jesus requested, and it set the stage for an amazing event.

It’s obvious that the plan of Jesus wasn’t a sudden decision made on the spur of the moment. He made arrangements and preparations in advance of this day, and as the story unfolds we see Christ orchestrating the events with resolve and a purpose. Christ sent His disciples on a task, and He set into motion a series of events that would culminate in His death, but not before His identity as the Messiah was clearly revealed.

Our Lord had a plan back then, and He has a plan for every one of us today. Are you seeking to live your life according to God’s plan, or are you trying to do your own thing? Turn to Jesus. He has a better plan.

II. The Reaction of the People.

Next we read in our passage of the way in which the disciples placed their long quadrangle robes on the colt so as to provide a comfortable seat for Jesus on the donkey, and they mounted the Lord on the animal. By this time a large crowd accompanied Jesus from the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, communities just east of Jerusalem up over the Mount of Olives, and the people began to carpet the road with their robes as well.

A caravan of pilgrims had already arrived in Jerusalem, and, perhaps having heard that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead just a few days before and was now on His way to the city, these people came pouring out of the eastern gate to meet Him. It’s estimated that the population in Jerusalem at the time of Passover swelled as much as 250,000 people.

They cut fronds from palm trees, and they went before Jesus to welcome Him. In Scripture the palm tree was a symbol of righteousness and spiritual vigor because of its perpetual leaves and longevity (Ps. 92:1,2). In addition, according to Leviticus 23:40 holding the palm branch in one’s hand was a way of expressing joy.

As the crowd descended the Mount of Olives toward the city, they praised God with loud voices and they shouted, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!*" (Mark 11:9,10). This quotation is from Psalm 118, and all 4 Gospels include it in their account of the Triumphal Entry. It's a quotation from one of the Hallel psalms sung during Passover, and it's also one of the psalms most often referred to in the New Testament. It's a distinctly Messianic psalm which speaks about the stone the builders rejected that became the capstone of God's work in the world. It is a prophetic message of what would, in fact, happen later on in the week to Jesus.

Our Lord showed His true colors that day, and He capitalized on the Messianic hopes and aspirations of the people. However, Jesus would be a different kind of Messiah than the one they were hoping for. He came riding not on a white stallion as a conquering king, but on a donkey as the Suffering Servant. He came not to overthrow the Roman government, but to overthrow the power of sin and death. He came not to take His seat on the throne of David, but to take His place on a Roman cross. And He came to set us free not from the rule of men, but to set us free from all the ways we're in bondage to things that will never last.

Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah or the kind of King the people were looking for. In the end He would disappoint them all, and the people would call for His death by the end of the week. Leading the way in this rejection of Jesus would be the Jewish leaders. They saw Jesus as a threat, and rightly so, because He would not only upend the tables of the Temple; He would also turn the world, *their* world, upside down.

How does your disappointment with God keep you from seeing with eyes of faith, like these Jewish leaders? In what ways do you allow your disappointment with Jesus to keep you from seeing Him as He truly is? I've found that for many people there is a gap between what they expect from God and what they actually experience with the Lord. Disappointment occurs whenever our experience falls short of our expectations. But I've also discovered that the healthiest corrective to this is to allow Jesus to break out of the little boxes into which I try to put Him. I need to accept Christ on His own terms and trust that Jesus will take even the disappointments of my life and cause them to work together for my good.

How has God disappointed you in recent days? Can you trust that Jesus has a good plan for you and the people you love and that He will yet bring good out of it?

III. For the Love of the King in the Time of a Pandemic.

This week I've reflected on the Triumphal Entry of Jesus, and I've thought about how it relates to our life right now during this pandemic. I've asked myself, "What was God up to then, and what is He up to now?" I want to mention four things this morning God impressed upon me this week from the events of Palm Sunday which I think speak to our current moment.

The first is this – *Jesus wasn't a helpless victim who was overwhelmed by the events and circumstances back then, and He's not overwhelmed by this pandemic either.* We may be overwhelmed, but Jesus isn't. As you study the life of Christ during His final week, you can see how He orchestrated the events that culminated in His death. He wasn't at the mercy of the crowd, the Jewish authorities, or the Roman officials and soldiers. He's actually the one in charge who was calling the shots, and each thing that happened God used to bring about the salvation of the world. It's remarkable.

There are times in our lives when it's easy for us to feel overwhelmed, like right now with the coronavirus. But God isn't helpless even in the midst of a pandemic, and I believe that just as He used the tragic events of Holy Week for a redemptive purpose, so He is going to use this current crisis to create a hunger for God in the hearts of people and even perhaps begin a spiritual awakening.

It is in times when people feel helpless that they turn to God. It's when we feel like the world is spinning out of control, we realize we can't fix things, and we ask God to help. You and I may feel overwhelmed by the events of our day, but God isn't. And as my friend Rick Wesley has often said, "There is no panic in heaven."

The second thing I want to mention is that *Jesus can be trusted in times when we're in the middle of a crisis.* And just as the disciples had to trust Jesus on the assignment they were given on Palm Sunday to retrieve the donkey, you and I need to trust the Lord during this time too. It's easy to give in to fear and worry. That's a very natural reaction. But we've got to trust that just as God was at work during the events of Holy Week 2,000 years ago, He's at work in this pandemic too. We've got to have faith.

Last week Joe Ely in our congregation shared with me something he read. It's written by a pastor in Virginia named Louie Andrews, and I found it a great encouragement. Perhaps you will too.

Disturbing and Dreadful Words

News anchors are using them excessively every night
Government leaders fill their speeches with them
Doom, Fear, Sickness and Death
All said in tones of calamity and despair
Are there no words to comfort and calm the panic?

Our human condition is indeed scary
But it is always like this for most of the world's people
Thousands never know if they will have food
More thousands never see a doctor
Thousands die without any help

So, what is our response to this crisis?
Can we fix this by ourselves?
For surely we are living in a mighty and affluent nation
With our state of the art medicine
And industry that can produce anything needed

Even so, many predict this little virus will overwhelm us
And as humans we can be overpowered
It has happened before in history
But the comfort is that God cannot be overwhelmed
The healing power of God is beyond all human effort

I remembered this when I saw the sunrise this morning
And the new greenness announcing yet another spring
What appeared dead around us is now living
God created this universe and everything in it
So we can turn to God for answers and for hope
That is God's eternal promise

The third thing I want to mention is that the story of Holy Week reminds us that *the redemptive plan of God always involves pain and hardship in order to bring ultimate spiritual healing*. God used the sufferings of Christ to bring redemption to the world, and He's going to use this pandemic in redemptive ways too.

Already we can see positive fruit that has come out of this crisis. The world has come together to fight this virus, and physicians and scientists all over the world are sharing their information freely with each other in order to fight the disease. The politicians in Washington have even set aside their differences (at least for the moment) to tackle the big problems we're facing. And isn't it nice not to have to listen to any news about the primaries or the election in the fall! In addition, people are sheltering in place and observing social distance in an effort to flatten the curve. This is an example of the strong serving the weak and trying to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

As I've talked to various ones of you, I've been encouraged to learn of the ways God has met you during this pandemic. People have talked about how they have slowed down their pace of life and actually enjoyed the break from the hectic rat

race they were running. Families have told me they are doing family devotions once again, playing board games together, and watching movies and eating popcorn. It's been nice not having to rush from activity to activity, and each of us has had an opportunity to catch our breath.

In a humorous vein Nancy Huber sent me a photograph of a sign in front of a church in Rhode Island that says it well. "I had not planned on giving up quite this much for Lent!" Sure, there are plenty of challenges and problems people are having to deal with. But we shouldn't miss the surprising gifts of grace that have also come during the pandemic. God has a plan. Can I trust Him in this time?

And finally, the events of Holy Week remind me that *the call of Jesus is to follow Him into the mess of this world and to know that He is with me wherever I go*. Jesus left the comforts of heaven and fellowship with the Father and the Spirit in order to enter our fallen world and bear our sin and shame. I've been inspired as I've learned of the stories of doctors and nurses on the front lines who are fighting this disease and are working themselves to the point of exhaustion. They and others are putting themselves at risk, and some are paying the ultimate price and have contracted the disease themselves all in an effort to help those who are suffering. They are heroes, and they're on the front line working in the trenches sacrificing for others. In this they are being like Jesus.

I've also been inspired by stories of people in our congregation who are entering into the mess of the world while still practicing social distancing and honoring the directives of government officials. One covenant partner is helping people who are homeless find somewhere they can shelter in place. These are some of the most vulnerable people in our community, and this man is putting himself at risk on behalf of those who live on the margins.

Another covenant partner drove to a nursing home in eastern NC where her mother-in-law is in lockdown. A number of the patients there have been infected with coronavirus, and no one is allowed to visit. So she stood outside her mother-in-law's room and looked through the window and extended her hands and prayed for her. She also walked around the entire building and prayed for all of the residents and the staff who are in such a place of illness, isolation, and fear.

These friends are following the example of Jesus who entered our mess and took on our burdens to deal with our problems. This is the way of Jesus. This is missional living.

Conclusion.

In C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* there is a scene in which the children have a conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan, the Lion, who is the Christ-figure in the story. They ask if Aslan is safe, to which Mr. Beaver replies, "Safe? ...Who said anything about being safe? 'Course he isn't

safe. He's the king, I tell you! He isn't safe, but He's good."¹

The Triumphal Entry and the events of Holy Week remind us that Jesus is unpredictable, and in many ways, He doesn't feel safe at times. You may be feeling unsafe right now in this pandemic. But just remember, while Jesus isn't safe, He is indeed good. And He can be trusted in these uncertain times to bring about God's good purpose in each of our lives and in the world as we keep our eyes fixed on Him and we place our hands in His. Trust in Christ. He will be with you today and always. To God be the glory! Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, pp.75,76