

Because of Us. For Us.

Matthew 21:1-11

Intro

So I am going to start with the obvious: today is Palm Sunday and with it being Palm Sunday there is an understandable expectation that most people want to hear one of the Gospel passages that describe Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We want the donkey; we want the palm branches; we want the shouts of hosanna.

Well,...your expectations are about to be met!

But I do have a caveat: the events that we long to hear are but a moment on the journey of sacrifice that is made by Jesus because of us, ...for us. The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 21:1-11

21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' ⁴This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'

¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 30-46

Intro

As I mentioned prior to the first reading, there is an expectation to hear the sort of passage that we just heard, especially considering that this is one of the few Sundays that has a name that is actually known, not only by the greater church, but absolutely in the general culture as well. The latter might not know what it's all about...but many have heard of it.

But as I said: it's a moment...a memorable one, but still just a moment. What we are about to hear leads us further into Holy Week. What it shows us just how great God's love for humanity is. Listen to all that takes place, and begin to realize that this was faced...because of all of us...for each one of us. The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 30-46

14 Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

20 When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' ²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' ²³He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' ²⁵Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

30 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

³²But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' ³³Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' ³⁴Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' ³⁵Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.'

And so said all the disciples.

36 Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' ³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' ⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' ⁴²Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.'

⁴³Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

"Because of Us. For Us."

There have been many a year when I have said in regard to Holy Week that we shouldn't go from the happy of Palm Sunday to the happy of Easter; that in order to understand what we claim our faith is founded upon that we have to deal with the 'other' realities of Holy Week. Mainly that sadness and sacrifice *are* a part of our reality of living together as the church.

In that vein, I had the opportunity to chat with the nursery school kids this past week and it was my job, 'to tell the story' of Easter (you know because there's this whole spring break thing that's happening).

Well, here's the question that I started them out with: 'when you think of Easter, what do you think of?' Now mind you, these are 3, 4, and 5 year olds, and their answers were right where I expected: Easter Bunny, chocolate, eggs, chocolate, baskets and toys, chocolate.

You get the picture.

The funny thing is, I think that Holy Week (which absolutely includes Easter) ends up being a similar thing for many adults.

For example, I met with the pastors from Clover Hill and Neshanic Reformed in order to prep for our joint Good Friday service. One of those colleagues mentioned how one of their parishioners had told them that they were looking forward to the Sunrise service on Easter morning...because that meant that they could focus on Easter activities.

I'll let that sit there for a moment or two.

Now let's get back to the kids.

Once I heard confirmed where I thought they were going to go with the whole, "so what do you think about when you think about Easter' question, I made the following statement: 'all of that stuff is a whole lot of fun...but none of it happens if we don't have Jesus.' At that point I read to them kids versions of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and yes, Easter as well.

At the end of the chat, one of the kids said to me, as matter of factly as could be, 'my mom and dad are in heaven too'. I tried to keep my composure...and faked it pretty well.

Now I was told afterward that it was actually the mom and dad of his mom and dad (his grandparents), but the point that he understood and the point he was resonating with is that these truths in scripture related to his story. They did die,... and now they are alive.

And that is why we heard from the scriptures the way that we did today...because it reminds us of truths that we need to acknowledge and actually embrace...because of us...for us.

Yes, we (through the Israelites) cheered when we heard he was coming.

Why wouldn't we? We're looking for that person, that savior, to set things right, to put down the things that have wronged us, that have only highlighted the brokenness in the world.

We cheered because we didn't want to be dominated by realities that said, 'you're going to struggle...and that's just the way it is'. Maybe that struggle was because of finances. Maybe it's because of the culture. Maybe it's because of a diagnosis.

Whatever the reason, we cheered and said, 'Hooray!! Hosanna!! The one who is coming will take over and make things right...for us.'

But that isn't what happened...at least not the way we (the Israelites) wanted.

Financial struggles are still a part of our reality.

The culture still says, 'if you believe in a God who cares, then you believe in fairy tale'.

And as for diagnosis, let alone the pain of death, yeah, we know it far too well.

And the cheers of celebration that we know as Palm Sunday dissipate into the background...because what we want to happen ...doesn't.

But God shows us through the story, if we are willing to hear it, know it, allow it to abide in and through us, that these pains that we know far too well, these are pains that Jesus ultimately experiences, yes because of us...but ultimately for us.

Because of us, because we are sinful.

I know, the last thing we want to hear when difficulties are being thrown against us is that we're in the wrong.

But the God of all creation is a just God...and we are guilty. Guilty of turning our backs on the savior when he doesn't meet our needs the way that we want. Guilty of saying one thing, and doing the other. Guilty...and we know why.

Jesus faced all this... because of us.

But the God who has revealed himself to us is also a loving and forgiving God who is able to say and show that He will do more than everything to bring us back into communion, connection, with Him.

Jesus is betrayed...Jesus dies...for us.

Jesus faced all this, because of us...because we are that loved by God.

Palm Sunday is important because it reminds us that Jesus is the king.

But what we are about to face (again) in the events of Holy Week, what we have heard about those events (at least in part), reminds us that what is to come not only shows us the sort of king Jesus will be, but the type of love that God has had for humanity, for each and every one of us, from the get go.

Sinful and yet loved.

Guilty and yet saved.

Rejected and yet known as pure.

Because of us. For us.

I know, it might sound like I am putting out one giant ad to come to the respective Holy Week services.

That is not what it's about. Not at all.

No, what it's about is reminding us of who we are...and who God (Jesus) has always been.

Because of us. For us.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, Your son came through these gates and we cheered him...and then, like so many, we rejected him. The amazing thing is, that You still look to us...and love us. Even though we have done wrong and have sinned in countless ways, Your love still prevails. Lead us in that journey to not only know how great Your love is, but to know that it is because of us, it is all the much more for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.