**Weekend of Sunday, April 2, 2022**

**Palm Sunday/Year A**

**First Reading:**

**Second Reading:**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:1-11**

***“The Power of Humility & The Importance of Faith”***

**Theme**

*Today, we encounter the paradox that defines our faith: Jesus Christ is glorified king and humiliated servant. We too are full of paradox: like Peter, we fervently desire to follow Christ, but find ourselves afraid, denying God. We wave palms in celebration today as Christ comes into our midst, and we follow with trepidation as his path leads to death on the cross. Amid it all we are invited into this paradoxical promise of life through Christ’s broken body and outpoured love in a meal of bread and wine. We begin this week that stands at the center of the church year, anticipating the completion of God’s astounding work.*

**Texts:**

**Processional Gospel: Matthew 21:1-11**

1When 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 fulfill 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.”

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

*The servant of the Lord expresses absolute confidence in his final vindication, despite the fact that he has been struck and spit upon. This characteristic of the servant played an important role in the early church’s understanding of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.*

 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**

*Paul uses an early Christian hymn to help us comprehend Jesus’ obedient selflessness on the cross and how God has made Christ lord over all reality. The perspective of the cross becomes the way we rightly understand God, Christ, our own lives, and fellowship within the community of Christ.*

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.

**Sermon**

Today is the "Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday", the most confusing festival on the liturgical calendar. It is a festival with a divided identity. Is it a parade and a party full of hope and joy? Or is it the beginning of the end of the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people of that day, and for all humanity since creation?

The Gospel Reading that I read for you in Crossroads is called the Processional Gospel – it is not the Gospel Reading prescribed for today. The Processional Gospel Reading is the *hope and joy* reading. Fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies written about him (Zechariah 9:9), Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Those of you who came to the Lenten Midweek Devotions have seen pictures of the exact path Jesus traveled as he rode a donkey from Bethany down into Jerusalem to the cheers of the lay Jews.

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

Have you ever rushed to a crowd just to see what everyone else was looking at? When I worked in industry I once made a business trip to California and I took advantage of the opportunity to sightsee a bit. I saw a crowd gathered on a beach and went over to get a look at what all the fuss was about and there was a production company shooting a Pringles commercial. I didn't see anyone famous, but I did watch for a few minutes.

Just days before the events of the Processional Gospel, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and that increased the enthusiasm of the Judean Jews. Now, as the city swelled for the celebration of the Passover, many of the Judean Jews who knew at least something of Jesus rushed out to greet him. They were abuzz with hope and joy as they asked each other, "Could this be the long-awaited Messiah of God?"

As is our nature, other pilgrims who may not have ever heard of Jesus rushed to the crowd to see what all the excitement was. Matthew wrote that 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.”

That is where the Processional Gospel ends, but according to Matthew, Jesus continued down into the Kidron Valley that separates the Temple Mount and Garden of Gethsemane and went through the Golden Gate to get up on the Temple Mount, and after looking around, he went down through the Huldah Gates to the court where money changers and merchants selling animals for sacrifice were doing business. As sometimes happens, they were gouging the pilgrims making them pay higher prices than normal for their services. Jesus upset their tables and ran them out exclaiming,

"It is written,
'My house shall be called a house of prayer;
but you are making it a den of robbers."Matthew added, 14The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.

All this was upsetting to the religious establishment, those responsible for the orthodoxy of the Jewish faith. They came up with a solution to *the Jesus problem* as they saw it.

Obviously, God saw the situation another way. God saw the problem as the religious establishment leading the people away from who God was, and what God wanted from God's people.

Isaiah the prophet was given a prophecy that sounds to me like he was explaining the mission of Jesus – did you hear it too? I'm going to say it is Jesus who Isaiah was prophesying about. Allow me to summarize:

In verses 4-6, the LORD has given the speaker

* "the tongue of a teacher;"
* daily, the LORD instructs him.
* he has been faithful in both listening to the LORD and delivering the LORD's message.
* And yet, for that, he was abused and humiliated by the very people the LORD was trying to reach.

In verses 7-9, the speaker said he will NOT be disgraced by his mission, for the LORD will vindicate him. And then he defiantly said,

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?

I hope you see it too. This prophecy that Isaiah was given was about Jesus. And everyone from Jesus' contemporaries to the religious establishment of his day, to anyone who picks up the Bible and reads this passage, should be able to comprehend how this week that we call Holy Week will go down because we were told 700 years before it happened – and yet, it still happened just like Isaiah foretold.

The apostle Paul used Jesus's Holy Week as an example to the rest of us. He wrote, that though Jesus was God and had the Power of God at his disposal, he did not deploy it. This is where Holy Week gets to me and exposes one of my biggest human flaws. I'm not proud of it, but back me into a corner and I am likely to get defensive and tell half-truths to defend myself if I have to, but not Jesus. First of all, based on the First Reading from Isaiah, Jesus had no half-truths in him. He faithfully did and said only what his Father gave him to do and say, and when he was backed into a corner, he simply accepted it as his Father's will. "Do what you need to do. I will faithfully demonstrate the love of God by not putting up a fight and dying for your sins."

Paul wrote, 5"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Oh man, that is the worst advice ever! Jesus got killed for it!

You won't hear the words of his Passion today. We don't read the Passion of Our Lord here at Zion, but that doesn't mean we can escape it. Those of us who call ourselves his disciples, which means that we are *disciplined* in his way of living, are confronted with it, it being his Passion, every year – actually every day, every moment of every day. Some think living a Christian life is like that big parade. "Yea! Jesus is our Messiah and God. Isn't Jesus-life great?!"

I wonder if they've heard the middle of the story, the part where Jesus was made a humiliated spectacle, and died an excruciating death on the cross as a failure and reject. When Jesus said, 16:24"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." we should realize that our agenda is no longer the preeminent agenda – his is, or should I say, God's is.

Sometimes I think about these words and I wonder why I want to be one of his disciples; why anyone would want to be one of his disciples?

But then I remember … He, Jesus, is everything I want to be and nothing that I am. What the world needs is a lot less of me and a lot more of him.

Jesus went on to say, 16:25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

I am really good at getting all wrapped up in myself – but Jesus said that is a dead end. But getting all wrapped up in him, living my life so close to his example that others can see him through me ought to be my goal. Because Jesus said that being like him who is in me, is where I will find life.

Allow me to repeat that because it is just about as contrary nonsense I can come up with, except that it is true.

I said, living my life so close to his example that others can see him through me ought to be my goal. Because Jesus said that being like him who is in me, is where I will find life.

I am clearly not there, but I can't make progress unless I know where I'm going.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Paul wrote,

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.

And so he:

* "emptied himself;"
* "humbled himself;"
* "and became obedient to the point of death.

He demonstrated that real faith is demonstrated through humility. And through humility comes access to the very power of God.

In a few days, Jesus will take another short journey. It will begin on Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane where he will be betrayed by one of his own. There he will be bound and led before leaders whose emotions range from sheer hatred and jealousy to complete apathy. They will have to make lies up about him because the truth about him would only vindicate him.

He will stand before them silently. He is empty, humble, and obedient.

But that isn't the end of the story, is it?

On the third day, God will vindicate him. And not just him, but all who call him Lord, as well.

Before I went to Israel, I only had one thing on my bucket list – to go to Israel. I checked it off.

Now I realize I have always had another one that supersedes the other. One day I hope to see Jesus face to face and thank him for his great love grace and mercy. I hope to see you there too.

**Prayer**

Everlasting God, in your endless love for the human race you sent our Lord Jesus Christ to take on our nature and to suffer death on the cross. In your mercy enable us to share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection. It is in his name that we pray. Amen