

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

Weekend of Sunday, April 10, 2022

Palm Sunday/Year C

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a

Second Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

Gospel Reading: Luke 19:28-40

**Sermon Title: “Gather us around the cross of Christ,
and preserve us until the resurrection”**

Theme

Today we follow Christ from triumphal entry to the cross, each waypoint of the journey marked by Jesus’ compassion for those who would betray, mock, accuse, or do violence to him. Though persecuted and beaten, Jesus the Son of God is not disgraced; instead, he asks forgiveness for those who put him to death. We have walked the Lenten pathway these forty days, each of us invited through baptism to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” We enter this holy week accompanying Jesus to the cross with both grief and thanksgiving in our hearts, trusting in God’s redeeming love.

Texts

Processional Gospel: Luke 19:28-40

²⁸After he had said this, [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

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.
^{9a}It 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

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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

In years past, I have called this day, Palm Sunday, also known as Sunday of the Passion, a roller coaster ride of emotions. And that is because the appointed readings for the day include the long reading of the Passion. But we don't read the Passion on the Sunday of the Passion here at Zion, because it makes us uncomfortable. "Let's save that for Good Friday," we say. But then, Good Friday was one of our most poorly attended worship services of the year even before the pandemic. Most of you don't know this but the Good Friday tradition at Zion was a choir cantata, that the choir worked on for months. And then the pandemic suspended the choir, and this year we just decided not to do it. Oh, there will be a Good Friday service available on our YouTube channel. Maybe you will watch that.

But we all love a Palm Sunday parade! We start the worship service differently and we hand out branches of palm and we sing bright and cheery hymns that are evocative of the joy the Jews had on the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

They should have known he was NOT what they wanted. They wanted a savior on a white horse brandishing a sharp two-edged sword that would inspire and lead them to run the Romans out of town and usher in a new golden era, like the legendary era of King David.

But what they got was a humble peasant man riding on the colt of a donkey. Well, no big deal, they must have thought, he has incredible powers. He's our man. We'll make him into the kind of king we want. They laid their cloaks on the path forming a first-century red carpet, and they broke off branches of palm and waved them forming a first-century ticker-tape parade. They shouted,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

And Jesus passed by, doing nothing to quell their euphoria. On the contrary, I think it could be argued that by his last exclamation of the Processional Gospel, he enjoyed the attention and encouraged it.

And ironically enough, according to Luke's Gospel, right after he entered the city, he went to the Temple and ran all the merchants out. Later during the week, there were other ups and downs; people praised him, and he seemed to be short with them. We can understand, knowing what he was about to face, but what a rollercoaster ride indeed.

But not today, today is all happy, happy, happy.

You do realize that I am messing with you intentionally, don't you? I am attempting to give you just a tiny sense of the uncomfortable tension that all Jerusalem must have felt. From Herod, and Pilot, to the Chief High Priest Caiaphas, to Jesus' disciples, to the Jews making pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, to the citizens of Jerusalem.

The First Reading from Isaiah is an indication that they/we should have known. When we hear it, post-Passion, we recognize Jesus:

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.

But they, like we, only hear what we want to hear. We call Jesus Lord of our lives and our example of godly living, but is he really?

In the Second Reading from the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, he 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,
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.

When you read those words are you moved to tears? Many of you have noticed how I so easily get emotional to the point of crying. I hate that about me, and please don't tell me how you love it because it just demonstrates my humanity – duh!

The problem that often moves me to tears is that I know everything about myself and the only other who knows everything about me is God, and when I think about Jesus going to the cross, I cannot help but be mindful of my complicity. I am the reason he went to the cross, to forgive my sins. Yes, yours too, but if I was the only sinner on the planet, he would have done it just for me. So maybe you can understand why I say, this day presents an uncomfortable tension for me. I cannot celebrate Palm Sunday with the enthusiasm of the crowds, knowing what happens next.

The sermon title for today is probably the longest title I have ever had: “*Gather us around the cross of Christ, and preserve us until the resurrection.*” Obviously, I'll be here all week, making all the services. I will leave here in silence on Thursday evening, and be forced to dwell in that uncomfortable tension until Easter. So for me, the sermon title fits, and is my prayer for us - “*Gather us around the cross of Christ, and preserve us until the resurrection.*” It fits my attitude about Palm Sunday without the Passion of our Lord.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Today is a day for people in the know to embrace that uncomfortable tension. And by people in the know, I mean, post-passion Christians; you and me.

We hear the Processional Gospel reading and we can sense the excitement of all involved, arguably, even Jesus. But what the revelers want and think they are getting in Jesus, is not what they will get. Pre-Passion Isaiah foretold the truth, but no one wants to hear that. Even post-Passion Paul, re-told the story to remind post-Passion Christians, you and me, of what God in Christ has done for us, even though we don't want to be reminded of the Passion – the Palm Sunday parade, sure, but not that bloody part.

Please come back this Holy Thursday evening. You will hear me say on that night that in my opinion, it's the holiest event on the church's calendar because our Lord Jesus knew what lay ahead for him, and though he could have stopped it, he went on. Oh, how he loves you and me.

So in a moment we will sing "He Is Exalted" and he should be, but not for his ride into Jerusalem to the delirious expressions of thankless sinners. Soon all of them will turn their backs on him and call for crucifixion. He is to be exalted for saving sinners such as them and such as us.

Prayer

O God of mercy and might, in the mystery of the passion of your Son you offer your infinite life to the world. Gather us around the cross of Christ, and preserve us until the resurrection, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen