

## Sermon April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday

Grace mercy and peace from God and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Happy Palm Sunday to all of you. We have come to the end of our Lenten season as of this week. The beginning of Lent seems like another time, another world ago. We must do Palm Sunday under unprecedented circumstances, and Holy Week and Easter this year will be burdened by the effects of the Coronavirus that are changing the world as we know it.

We enter Holy week in these trying times. Holy Week is about hope. It is about hope, as are all religious holy days. And there are a cluster of major holy days of various world religions in these next couple of weeks. In trying times, and under circumstances that cause us to fear for our well-being, religion gives us something to grab onto, gives us reason to believe and hope in God's almighty power.

The way Palm Sunday and Holy Week give Christians hope is in the way these holy days speak to our fear of death, and the way they point to the power of God to overcome death in the end. This is what is unique about our Christian celebration of these holy days, and it is something we share humbly with the world. In these days, we are all fighting for hope. We are trying to stay positive while seeing the negative all around us. We need guidance, discipline, and courage. Most importantly, we need faith. Especially Christians in this time need to step up in faith, and ask God to give us more faith.

We begin our celebration of Holy Week with the accounts from the Bible of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is the beginning of the last week of his life. What do the people on Palm Sunday see? The Crowd, what do they see? What do they think they're doing? How do they understand what's going on? We put ourselves in their shoes. We enter the story.

Their challenge is ours as well. That much hasn't changed, no matter what kind of history you are living through.

The question that our texts ask is what do you see when Jesus enters the city, and are you prepared to follow him?

The spectacle is unprecedented.

What did the crowd see when Jesus came by on a donkey?

Some saw a prophet. We know that. That's what they called him as they told others what they were doing.

Some saw a Messiah. We know that. They knew about God's promises over the years to the nation of Israel, and the words of the prophets that pointed to the coming of a new messiah.

Some saw a messianic king. We hear that in the cries of the crowd, and especially the children.

But others in the crowd were perhaps not so sure. Some might have seen the man leading the procession as a tragic figure. Some perhaps suspected that he was just going to get in trouble when he got to Jerusalem.

Some might have seen a naïve religious leader. True, he was an amazing teacher, and was known by many to have the power to heal and perform miracles. Yet, what did he imagine he could accomplish by riding into the holy city on a donkey?

Indeed, Some might have seen a fool. Even as we imagine him arriving at the gates, we see that he has nothing to work with, no disciplined entourage, no security detail, no pomp and no circumstance. Surely, everyone in Jerusalem is going to laugh at him.

Imagine what the people in the procession see as they enter the city.

From street level, in their own understanding, the crowd gathers because they recognize Jesus.

He gathers with his disciples at Bethpage, a day's walk from Jerusalem.

He gives instructions.

He pulls together his retinue, his entourage.

What does he require? Nothing but a donkey, with its foal. And the common people around him follow.

And the crazy simplicity of it all doesn't dissuade the crowd.

They've heard this preacher, and they say, he's a prophet.

They've heard about his miracles, some even seen them.

Some of those in the crowd are walking now for the first time because of him, talking now because of him, seeing and hearing now because of him. They join the cries that come unprovoked from the lips of joyous children:

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

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

But as the crowd following Jesus enters the gates, some in this procession might turn their eyes to the scope of the city itself.

They must weigh in their minds the size of their hopes for this prophet, versus the size of the city walls, the stones built over the centuries, rock on rock.

Think of the tortured history of these very walls, built up in pride in the time of David and Solomon, only to be ransacked first by the Assyrians, and then by the Babylonians. Yes, these walls have seen glory, but also despair. More recently closer to Jesus' own time, these walls have been conquered first by the Greeks and then by the Romans, who now open and close the gates at will.

Some of these people in the crowd must assess the scope of the obstacles that are beginning to make themselves known the farther Jesus's procession gets into the city; the forces of leadership arrayed against him; the entrenched power of the Jewish leaders, who have been out to get him from the start; the treacherous rogue elements in the underground Jewish resistance, who may have grandiose dreams of vanquishing the Romans and chasing them out. And they see the might of the Roman military, in all its imperial grandeur, which will not tolerate revolution in any form.

I imagine that to many in that crowd, at least to those who have some experience, who are more jaded, whose faith has wavered over the years, worn down by the repeated violence of the state, and by the treachery of those who refuse to let go of power, they start to see the improbability of success in Jesus' mission. Hopelessness might start to trickle in.

As we try to enter into the story at this point, and put ourselves in their shoes, I think we might be finding ourselves in the grip of a similar hopelessness too.

For as we move along our own unfolding crisis, we too see the obstacles to success growing day by day.

We see the numbers of infections go up.

We see the body count pile up.

We see the strain on our system, a system woefully unprepared, despite all of its incredible, but now seemingly hapless economic power and military strength.

We hear the pleas of officials, we see the concern of health professionals, and the heartbreak of those whose loved ones are sick.

In fact, we are also affected physically even if we are not sick, for on this holy day for a procession, we gather in homes because we can't have a procession, because we aren't even allowed to meet outside, let alone gather inside a church building.

So if we are marching at all with Jesus today, it is only in our minds. We may be marching this week with our reserves depleted, our courage slipping away, and our faith faltering. Yes, there is a lot to be thankful for, and many around here have enough extra to make it last for as long as we need it to. But the creeping dread of disarray, of potential chaos, of sickness and death, and the knowledge that our world will be changed in ways we can't predict, shake our confidence and cause us to fear. One day in the not too distant future, we will have to reckon with the legacy of all the dead of 2020. We in all our blazing, wired, interconnected technological societies will have to reckon in a new way with the power of the natural world which we do not control, but of which we are intimately and mortally a part.

Yet it is to you dear Christians, and to you as well, who count yourself something else, addressing one and all, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his paltry procession calls us back to ground. This Jesus does not leave us to despair, and he doesn't want us to fear, but bids us join the procession from our perches on the sidelines of faith. He bids us to have faith, and then come follow him.

This same Jesus looked past the vast crowds with all their different and conflicting expectations and spoke directly to his closest disciples just before this procession started. He warned them what was coming. Of all the people, the disciples should have had the clearest vision of what was happening. True, the crowds were acting according to what they can understand, and true, it is beautiful in its innocence and purity. Indeed, those with very little to lose often see most clearly. The bulk of that procession that day were from the common people. They saw that Jesus is the messianic king, who is returning to his city to claim it back from those who would oppress and control, those who refuse to act in good faith. And it is in the purity of their faith that God wishes to have his name extolled above all other names.

But the disciples are given insight and foreknowledge. They have been told how it's going to go down, Yes, they've been warned.

In the gospel accounts, Jesus predicts to them on three different occasions what will happen to the "Son of Man", four times in the gospel of Matthew.

Jesus tells them that he will be arrested and tried by the authorities, tortured and put to death, and then will rise again on the third day. The third prediction in [Matthew 20:17–19](#) given just before the beginning of the procession, specifically mentions crucifixion:

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"<sup>[11]</sup>

In other words, this procession ends in failure before it sees success.

And they hear it but don't get it. They follow, they obey, up to a point. And we know that that limit, beyond which no disciple will go, is coming. It's coming at the end of that Holy Week.

We know that limit is coming when those who love him, will fall away in fear despite themselves. It is when one little hopeful procession ends, and the next predictable oppression begins. Isn't this the end of all our little hopes? Hope spreads again and again, until each time it is snuffed out like a candle.

As far as truths go, this one is pretty stable. And we might find ourselves looking down the barrel of this truth yet again in our current predicament. After all, what really can be done to slow this virus? What really can be done to protect all our lives? And even more cynically, who cares who gets sick, let's just take a gamble, turn off the social distancing and economic shutdown and pretend like we can just get back to normal. Let the strong survive.

But friends, as much as this truth might say something true about our lack of faith, it isn't the whole truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The truth of our faithlessness is not the only truth, and it is not the only that Jesus sees. This is not the faith of Jesus. We know from Jesus' teachings, and then from his predictions

of the end, that he sees not just the failure of those around him, and thus the failure of his mission in his own death, but also the victory of God's power over death, which is something no one else around him seems capable of. Jesus sees God's power in faithful action, and he sees faithful action as a sign of the victory over death that is to follow. Contrary to the observable facts, God has not abandoned his messenger, nor has God abandoned his people, and nor will God abandon the world. God's faithful action in the world comes to Jerusalem this morning riding on a donkey, hidden right before our eyes in humility and simplicity and gentleness. In the eyes of the world this faithful action will fail, but to the eyes of Easter faith, it will succeed.

So now we too are challenged by this hope. We are called out of the sidelines and back into the faithful procession. We are called to live in hope, through righteousness and faithful living, seeking to do that which is God's will for us in our time, and leaving the victory over death to God.

We are called to join in hope with others who look for signs of hope amidst the mounting toll of death. We are called to join those who follow and obey, to follow those who are just doing their duty, to serve and protect, to help heal as best they can those who have been stricken with the virus. And when we are quarantined on the sidelines, or asked to stand aside for lack of expertise, we then must lift our voices, and give thanks for those who serve in so many ways. Processions of faith abound, if we have eyes to see. Like the video seen on tv and the internet this week, of the nurse walking down the NY city street on her way to work, with people hanging out their windows, rattling noise makers and cheering out their windows, giving thanks for those who go to work to confront this outbreak every day.

Indeed, in hope we see that we are not helpless, but can do our part as well. Then every action suddenly turns to a sign of hope. The care you take as you go to the store, the social distance you keep, the masks you wear, the hygiene you keep, when performed faithfully, are all signs of hope that challenge the despair we sense lurking close by.

And at the root of such hope, for Christians, is the humble rabbi on a donkey, who calls himself king. Our Christian faith proclaims that he is not crazy, but is really a sign from God. It is a sign that the God of Israel has heard our pleas, has felt our

fears, and has seen our suffering at the hands of death, and has acted. He is the sign of the kingdom to come, and which is already here in the presence of those who live in hope. May we be faithful in our living, may we have strength to endure, and may we enter holy week looking to see the sign of God's hope for the world at Easter. Amen.