

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at  
Clarence Presbyterian Church on March 24, 2024.**

**REORIENTATION**

*<Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; John 12:12-16>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing  
and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

In the abbey on the Isle of Iona, Scotland, there is a curious piece of stonework. Carved into one flying buttresses, and in a location so as to be visible primarily by the preacher when they stand in the pulpit, is the face of a person, seemingly caught in a scream of agony. Known as "The Tormented Soul," there remains to this day some mystery as to its origin. One legend claims that it is the architect's self-depiction during the building of the abbey, which took some time and was slowed by unexpected setbacks to be overcome. Another legend states that the builders were not going to receive the full pay they had been promised, and one disgruntled worker chiseled this as a lasting reminder to be honest in one's dealings. But the prevailing legend, and the one I ascribe to, is that it is meant as a constant reminder to the preacher that the people of the world are hungry for the hope and comfort of the Gospel, and to learn of the fullness of Life which has been promised in the resurrection. It is, then, a visible sign of the need to preach hope, good news, and comfort to those who are in need, and to never place one's self - or especially the Gospel - in a position unattainable to the people.

Which brings us to our readings today.

It would have been quite the spectacle to behold. The crowds gathered along the side of the road would have been filled with nervous energy and excitement, bringing an almost carnival feel to the proceedings at hand. You can almost hear the shouts for attention, and picture the roadway lined with spectators creating a central corridor for the procession. While this was no ordinary occasion in and of itself, it was made all the more so by the timing, just ahead of the Passover Celebration in Jerusalem.

The annual festival of Passover was an entire week of remembering, honoring, and celebrating the liberation enacted by God, releasing the people from slavery in Egypt. The culmination of the festival was the remembrance of the moment of their release, marked by the Tenth Plague upon the Egyptians. Joyous retelling of how, at God's instruction, the doorposts and lintels were painted with lamb's blood, so that the Spirit of God passed over the Israelite households, sparing them and allowing them to be ready to go when Pharaoh gave the word of release. It was a heightened time of year to begin with, and now more so because of this procession, approaching from the northern edge of town, as Pilate made his way astride an ornate horse to help oversee the Roman presence in Jerusalem, and to ensure the Roman interests were protected. He would have looked down upon the faces, and seen only subjects to be ruled and directed, to be held in check and in place. He would have looked with eyes ready to notice even the hint of rebellion or movement against the Empire of the world he was tasked with representing in the region.

Now, while this worldly-oriented procession was taking place, another procession was also taking place, with as different a purpose as possible from the royal one to the north. On the other side of Jerusalem, crowds likewise lined the roadway leading from the Mount of Olives up to another gate of the city in the south. The energy and the potential spectacle would have been quite the same as the northern procession, bookending the city in between them. The purpose, and what was being represented, could not have been more different, though. Here, shouts of “hosanna” filled the air, while palm branches were waved and garments placed on the dusty roadway. Jesus was coming into Jerusalem, ahead of the Passover celebrations, and certainly his presence in Jerusalem for this festival was a herald of what was to come for the people of God living under Roman rule. In their eyes, Jesus was now coming into the city to take the heavenly throne as the Messiah. In their eyes, in the hope of their hearts, Jesus as Messiah was coming to bring about the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God here on earth, which meant no other earthly power or interest would hold sway. No longer would foreign armies occupy the region. In their eyes, no longer would laws be passed that enforced Roman interests. In their eyes, no longer would heavy taxes be levied to uphold worldly wealth. In their understanding, Jesus was arriving into Jerusalem for the Passover Festival as the conquering hero, the warrior-king who would drive out the Roman presence from the area.

John’s gospel is unique in a number of ways from its synoptic counterparts, in part benefiting from being written almost one hundred years after the events of Jesus’ life and ministry. And one of these unique aspects can be found in these verses, with the perspective of the Triumphal Entry being located in the midst of the crowd. In these brief verses, for as much as they depict Jesus’ arrival into Jerusalem, did you notice that he doesn’t speak a word? In the other gospels, Jesus gives explicit instruction to the disciples as to where to prepare a room for the Passover feast and where to find a mount for him to ride as he makes his entrance. He even soliloquizes on the nature of what he is about, and what this means for the Kingdom of God and his role. But here in John’s gospel, there is none of that. Instead, the focus is on the crowd. The focus is on the people who are in need of good news.

These are people who have recently borne witness to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, seeing first hand what he is capable of realizing in the Spirit of God. Their ranks are swelled by those who have heard of this event, and wish now to see Jesus with their own eyes, to support what he clearly - in their minds - has come to do. Namely, the realization of the fullness of the Kingdom of God which can only be accomplished through the perfect vanquishing of the Roman presence. And their ranks are further increased by the scribes, Pharisees, and religious leaders who are not sure what to make of Jesus and his ministry, his movement which is gaining energy precipitously.

But Jesus does not enter Jerusalem in the way the expected warrior-king would. As the people shout “Hosanna” - literally beseeching redemption and salvation, in their minds from their earthly hardships and realities - in John’s gospel Jesus is not astride a horse like Pilate, or even a colt, but rather sits even lower on a donkey. He still rides in, as the arriving king would, but does so not above the people. Rather, even on a donkey, he is

among the people, on the same level as them. And this is an immensely important distinction to make.

Because yes, Jesus is coming in to Jerusalem to bring about the fulness of the Kingdom of God and the intimate presence of God among the people, forever and ever. But it will not be in the way that was expected, imagined, or hoped for. Jesus, riding among the people on the donkey, sets this reality. Even setting aside his proclamations of how he must die in order to be raised to life, that the Son of Man must be lifted up in order to be glorified...regardless of these teachings, his arrival in such a state establishes two primary realities that are about to be borne into the world.

First, it establishes that the Kingdom of God will indeed come, but not in the understood, imagined, or expected manner. Rather, through Jesus' impending betrayal, trial, crucifixion, death, burial, and then resurrection, something greater than ever could have been imagined will be realized. More on that in the days to come as we join together for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and then Easter Sunday.

Second, it establishes that the fullness of the Kingdom of God, rather than bringing military victory and earthly power, will bring victory over the weight of death along with a heavenly power which cannot be overcome.

It is what we need. It is what we hope and yearn for. But it is not what was expected or anticipated. The people gathered outside the Jerusalem gate that day, whether they knew it or not, were being invited to reorient their hopes and expectations toward what was being realized in the world: the kingdom of Life. Jesus, entering Jerusalem on the same level as the people, will be ushering into the world the fullness of what the people need in order to embrace the abundance of Life - rich, purposeful, meaningful Life. It would not be what was anticipated or imagined, but what was needed.

John's gospel, repeatedly, reflects on the state of the disciples as "they do not understand at the time but they remember later" what was to happen, and what it would mean. Even the disciples did not fully realize, but would recall that they, too, must reorient their understandings away from what had been imagined to what God was, and is, in fact, doing to establish a kingdom of life in response to an empire of death. Even the disciples needed to reorient themselves to God's new reality.

And so do we, today. This was never a one-time event, but rather a new reality which is being realized over and over in each new moment. Even as we wave our palm branches and sing our hosannas, the kingdom of life continues to be proclaimed and established, again and again, against the empire of death and the limited powers of the world. As we bear witness again with our palm branches and songs, may we shift our expectations and attention, orienting them again on that which brings life and fulfillment. And may we, in seeing the presence of Christ, work in the Spirit to proclaim and realize life in the world around us to its full. It is, after all, what is needed. Amen.