

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, April 9, 2017 - Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

O give thanks to God,
for God is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say,
God's steadfast love endures forever.

Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to God.

This is the gate of God;
the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you
that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is God's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that God has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O God!

O God, we beseech you,
give us success!

Blessed is the one

who comes in the name of God.

We bless you from the house of God.

The Sovereign is God,

and God has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God,

and I will give thanks to you;

you are my God,

I will extol you.

O give thanks to God,

for God is good,

for God's steadfast love

endures forever.

This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God!

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the

Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"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."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The 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!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Let us pray...Amen.

Today marks the end of our Lenten journey. Some of us have fasted from a particular food item or behavior. Some of us have spent extra time reading scripture, or other texts designed to enhance our understanding of our faith and our faith journey. Some of us have simply lived our lives in expectation of Easter.

Holy Week begins today, and ends with our Easter celebration next week. Each week, in worship, after our prayer of confession and words of assurance, we have extinguished one candle, to represent the ultimate betrayal of our Lord and Savior at the hands of his closest friends and followers. Each week, our altar space has gotten a little bit darker, to represent our own role in the Christ's betrayal. A mini tenebrae, in the midst of our Sunday worship.

For close to 2000 years, Christians have followed the path of this journey, using Lent to fast in order to focus on Christ's suffering, or to read in order to be reminded of Christ's last weeks of ministry, or to perform acts of kindness and charity to honor Christ's sacrifice.

And while there is a general understanding that following that path is a good thing, tradition and custom tells us so, there is nothing explicitly biblical that tells us what we should do during Lent. It's the early church's interpretation of scripture that leads us through our days in Lent.

And we've added our own traditions that make Lent meaningful in our own lives, haven't we? Many might say it's not Lent if we don't have our Lenten Luncheon series, filled with diverse worship leaders and diverse and delicious soups.

Scripture tells us that Jesus began his final journey into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Two animals at once? That's interesting.

All four gospels describe the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem by our Lord and Savior, and all four note that the disciples laid their cloaks on the donkey and colt, and the crowd laid their cloaks on the ground, with some branches from the trees. But palms are never mentioned. That's interesting.

Custom and culture from those days dictated that a king riding on a horse was riding for battle. A king riding on a donkey was riding in peace. That's interesting.

2014 years after his entrance into Jerusalem, after his arrest, his torture, after his crucifixion and death, after his resurrection, Jesus continues to remain a most mysterious figure.

A charismatic rabbi, able to perform miracles like turning water into wine, healing people with all kinds of diseases, able to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, all to illustrate the glory of God.

It feels like the world is losing patience with the mystery of Christ. As scholars and scientists argue about what would have been historically accurate, what would have been 'true' about the time Jesus lived among us, it feels like people care less and less about the mystery, the paradox of our Lord and Savior. Does it feel that way to you?

So much about Jesus is incredible: born of a virgin, able to perform miracles, crucified and killed, only to be resurrected...no science can help us understand the implications of these mysteries. Ultimately, we have to wrestle with them ourselves. We believe or we don't.

But what *I* believe is that we can never separate the mystery from the person Jesus was, and so there are moments in our faith lives when we must decide whether we believe in Jesus because of what scripture said he did, or because of who he is in our lives.

And if we believe in Jesus because of who he is in our lives, then this next week plays a powerful role in our remembrance of his final days on earth.

If we believe in him because of what scripture says about him, then we can go through this week with a kind of painless detachment, removed from his painful betrayal, his humiliation, his torture, his sacrifice. We can read about his passion, his trials like a story that has no effect on us.

But if we're on this journey with him, then we'll feel some of that pain, our cheeks will sting with some of the humiliation he felt. We'll wash other's feet, and have our feet washed. We'll break bread together, and share juice together, like he did, in remembrance of him. Mysterious acts that have a profound effect upon our faith lives.

The world wants science to tell us if Jesus really did the things the bible tells us he did. Science can't do that. The world wants historians to tell us if Jesus was really the way the bible tells us Jesus was. History can't do that. At some point, the faithful have to move beyond science and history, and move into the mystery of our faith. We have to be ok with not knowing for sure, but knowing in our hearts. And there's a difference, isn't there?

I can't help but mourn the state of the Christian Church in these modern times, and I can't help but note that the Christian Church's problems seem to stem from our inability to put into practice the very things Jesus calls us do. If we practiced loving each other as he loves us, as we love ourselves, if we loved our enemies, if we turned the other cheek, if we loved God with all our hearts, and all our minds and all our souls, the world wouldn't doubt the truth.

But for now, with the advent of Holy Week upon us, we have mystery, and we have hope. We do not have science, or history, or culture, or customs to

feed us, we have our own personal faith to lead us into our understanding of the Christ's ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

We can shout Hosanna! today because we already know the rest of the story: we won't be disappointed when the Messiah turns out to be a peace-loving, peace-preaching peacenik.

We can sit at the table with Jesus, and break bread, because we know what he did for us and for our sins.

We can take risks in the name of our faith, move outside our comfort zone, share our resources beyond what might be prudent, because we have the reassurance and the mystery of Easter morning to back us up.

At the end of the day, we have to find a way to be comfortable with the mysteries of our Lord and Savior, be comfortable with the things that don't make sense, the things that get at the heart of our faith. Not because tradition tells us to, or because it's the custom of Christians to do so. But because we are learning to embrace the mystery of Christ.

At the end of the day, either we have hope in the resurrected Christ, or we do not. Holy Week helps us focus on the paradox of a king, arrested, tortured, humiliated, and crucified, only to triumph over all earthly bounds, and even death itself, in order that you and I might be forgiven. And we *are* forgiven.

And that is the ultimate mystery. Thanks be to God. Amen.