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Walking in the Way of Jesus: Into Jerusalem

Matthew 21:1-11

Philippians 2:5-11

If your life is anything like mine, I find it tough to remember what day of the week it is. All of our normal markers are gone. If normal routines and events are no longer then every day is much like the other, and so Sunday feels much like Monday, and Monday is a lot like Friday. And, at the same time, there is this strange foreboding cloud that suggests that today could be different. Today could be the day that we get sick. Is that today, tomorrow or the next day? We don't know exactly what is coming, but we suspect that it is not good. Will this trip to the grocery store expose me today to the virus? The future is uncertain and most of our landmarks have been removed.

It occurred to me that this state of being might actually help us understand and observe Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Because as Jesus leaves the Mount of Olives and begins his descent into Jerusalem, there is in the air a sense of foreboding and uncertainty. In John's Gospel, the disciple Thomas actually says, "Well, if Jesus is going to go back towards Jerusalem, we might as well go with him to die." (John 11:16) And in Matthew's Gospel this Palm Sunday Parade is preceded by Jesus' own prediction of his death by crucifixion (Matthew 20:17-19). So, our own current state of mind and heart is probably closer to the minds and hearts of the disciples than any other Palm Sunday in my memory.

But, at the same time, when Matthew tells us of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he wants us to clearly understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies in the Jewish scriptures for the coming of the Messiah. Matthew quotes from the prophet Zechariah to make clear to us all exactly who Jesus is. "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet." And, if we go back and look at what Zechariah says, the prophecy is of a great, warrior king who will come and subdue all of Israel's enemies and bring God's kingdom to full expression.

So, regardless of the foreboding of the disciples (and we who know how the story ends), Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts that name him as the King that the crowds wanted. So they, and maybe we and the disciples, are looking for Jesus to parade into Jerusalem and take over – take control – subdue our enemies – establish justice – heal the sick and bring world peace! We secretly want Jesus to be a cross between General Patton and Ms. America!

This is the parade that we all want! And yet, even as the palm branches obscure the hard stones of the road into Jerusalem, we know that the parade that Jesus will lead OUT of

Jerusalem is a very different parade. He enters Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna!” and to a welcome fit for a king. He leaves Jerusalem carrying his own cross on his way to Golgotha -the place of the skull – for execution by crucifixion.

As we begin to mark this Holy Week – unlike any other in our lives – I’d like to suggest that we may be closer this week to understanding what it means to walk in the way of Jesus – to seek God’s Kingdom – than at any other time in recent history. We are in a better position to understand how very different God’s way in the world is from our own human desires and tendencies.

When the Apostle Paul talks about how God was at work in the world through the person of Jesus Christ, he uses an ancient Christian hymn in his letter to the Philippian Church. And Paul calls on those disciples and on us to live in the world as Jesus lived in the world. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (NRSV) “Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.” (CEB)

The way of Christ in the world is a way of giving, serving, suffering, humility and self-emptying. And the American Church and we – as American Christians – who have known precious little suffering have avoided this truth of the Gospel as hard as we could.

Our human hearts want to enter Jerusalem with a show of power and majesty and take control. We enter the world to OWN it. But Jesus entered Jerusalem in humble love and obedience – obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Jesus enters the world to serve it. Jesus enters the world to empty himself in love for it. Jesus entered the world to suffer with us. Jesus entered the world to show us that there is no other way to true life – no other way into the Kingdom of God. Jesus came into the world and called us TO FOLLOW him – to live as he lived.

This Palm Sunday, we remember that there is no way to true life except through suffering and death. There is no way to compassion and comfort, except through suffering. There is no way to joy and abundance, except through giving of ourselves – emptying ourselves.

We know this in our hearts. We know how hollow we feel when we have bought too much, eaten too much, drunk too much, done too much. None of what the world offers us brings us lasting peace and joy and purpose. We know that it is in entering into the suffering of those we love – caring for each other and sharing in our sufferings and in our joys – that we know true community and love.

So, this week, I encourage us all to put up some markers in our lives – maybe it is making time to join our online events for evening prayer or Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. However we do it, let’s pledge to each other that we will remember this week that following Jesus is never a spectator sport. Love is never a spectator sport. Jesus didn’t suffer and die so that we never have to suffer or die. He entered into our suffering and death to show us HOW TO SUFFER AND

TO DIE. Jesus shows us that suffering and death are often the only ways we are able to learn what it means to be faithful, loving and real.

This week, we are all invited to enter into the suffering of the world and to sit with that for a while. Yes, it is painful. But do you know what we call it when we refuse to suffer and seek quick relief from pain? We call that addiction. Instead, the Gospel offers us real life. And real life is where true love is found; where true joy is found; where purpose and meaning are found; where God is found.

We have to courage to shout “Hosanna!” once we understand that Jesus isn’t entering Jerusalem to claim a political and military victory, but instead to claim his own obedient suffering and death. But, I know you to be a courageous people. I invite you to join the parade.

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