

A Parade, And Then...

Text: Matthew 21:1-11

Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – April 5, 2020

Rev. Michael F. Atzert

On the approach to Jerusalem, the disciples and Jesus are walking along the road when Jesus instructs two of the disciples to go the distant village and bring Him the donkey and her colt that are tied there. If they are given any resistance by the owner of the donkey and colt, the disciples are simply to reply, “The Lord needs them.” The two disciples go on ahead of the rest of the group, find the donkey and colt, and bring them to Jesus. And so begins the events of that first Palm Sunday.

This week, I have thought about what that first Palm Sunday must have been like. The excitement, the promise, the hope of things working out the way the disciples and the followers of Jesus had hoped. The coming of the Messiah – the coming of Jesus – into Jerusalem. The parade and the pomp and circumstance of it all. The people shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Jesus has arrived.

It is all such a beautiful scene, and I imagine that the disciples and followers of Jesus were feeling pretty good at that moment. This is it. They are good to go for their future. So, this was a moment in time to celebrate, and what better way to do so than with a parade. I can picture the smiles, the sense of confidence, the first century equivalent of high fives and fist bumps. A parade, and then...

And then Thursday comes and Jesus presides over the Passover meal talking about His body and blood being given and shed for them. He reveals that one among them will betray and one will deny Him. Not me, Lord, how can you possibly say that? They move to the Garden, where the disciples cannot even stay awake while Jesus prays the most fervent, most difficult prayer of His human life. And then – the arrest, the flogging, the release of Barabbas, and finally

the crucifixion and death. Their optimism and excitement turn into nightmare, and fear and anxiety and dread. They fall into extreme uncertainty like they have never experienced.

On March 7, 2020, the Session met on that Saturday morning to talk about outreach and vision for the church. However, the events of that week also meant that discussion had to include making some decisions about the changing environment with the outbreak of the coronavirus. Among those things discussed and decided that morning was how to handle communion, what to do with the passing of the peace, and joining hands at the end of the service. In all honesty, I felt really good about all of it – the good discussion, how quickly there was consensus, and how easily this new plan was communicated to and put into place with those involved in that Sunday's worship service. I am not sure I have seen the church work and act so quickly!

It was, if you will, our own – this is it. We are good to go. God is in the details of how we are handling this event. On that Sunday, March 8th, we had a really good worship and fellowship. Everyone was mindful and warm, from more of a distance. I do not doubt that it was hard not to hug and show the love we have, but you did it. It was a new, but still genuine worship, celebration of God and being together. And then...

Things have gone from bad to worse to quickly, and now we are separated from one another as we practice our social distancing. Life is basically at a standstill for many, if not most of us. Our heroes and superheroes in the medical field and those considered essential personnel are in our constant thoughts and prayers – we cannot imagine what they deal with on a daily basis. We worry – we are afraid – we are going a little (or perhaps a lot) stir crazy. There is extreme uncertainty like we have never experienced. Maybe, just maybe, we are feeling a little

like the disciples were when things started going out of control on Thursday and Friday of that first Holy Week. Where do we find our comfort and peace?

Well, I am not sure that they are explicitly in the Scripture for this morning. The disciples are still in Palm Sunday mode. We have to look at the larger context of the story to see the grace – to see what is to come for the followers of Jesus. Jesus coming on the back of a donkey is the fulfillment of prophecy. It is the kickoff of God’s Divine plan.

Jesus (God in the flesh) is in control, knowing that as events play out during that week, it is God’s ultimate plan for His creation – a plan borne out of the unconditional, agape’ love that God has for His children. Although things would get bad – really bad – for the disciples, here is what would remain. God would overcome sin and death – showing that He is Sovereign and in charge. He would calm the fears of the people. God would assure a future that is beyond their knowing. And He would equip them with faith and with strength and with one another. And then, Jesus would be raised from the dead. And then, the disciples would see and believe. And then, they would begin proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. And then, life would be fuller, richer, and eternal.

Friends, I feel as though this is somewhat where we are. It is sometimes tough today to look for the comfort, peace, hope, and grace of our God amidst the chaos and confusion of our world, our nation, our state today. However, I think if we try to see the larger picture of this, we will find it – and it will sustain us and help us in our times of greatest need.

One thing I think we have to be careful about is to not try and figure out what God’s role is in this – His personal involvement. I am not saying this morning that the virus is part of God’s plan because I think that raises all kinds of questions and problems about the nature and love of God. And God’s role in suffering and calamity, it seems to me, is way beyond our finite minds.

So, I do not want to make the pronouncement that God is doing this for this reason or that reason. That is not helpful today.

However, what I do know with certainty is that God promises to walk with us through all seasons and times. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. This is especially true when we have nothing left to hang onto – we cling to God’s presence in these days. He walks with us when we have watched too much television news and we are afraid. God calms our fears with that peace that passes all understanding. God overcame the power of sin and death in the cross of Jesus Christ and He will help us to get through this time, however long that might be. God assures us that in all things, He is in control. And He equips us – despite everything – with faith and strength and the power of being in community with one another.

I imagine that this Holy Week will feel different for most, if not all, of us this year for many reasons. Good Friday may be more weighted this year – we might feel it differently this week. But after that, then Easter. Then resurrection. Then hope and promise that is only found in Jesus Christ. Let us hold on to that. To God be the glory. Amen.