

"The Road into Jerusalem"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 19: 3-6, 28-40

Luke 19: 3-6, 29-40

³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Litany of the Palms

(Please rise in body or spirit, hold high your palm branches, & repeat after me.)

Hosanna!

Hosanna!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

God save us!

Hosanna!

In Christ we are united!

Christ comes for all people!

All ages!

All races!

All creeds!

All classes!
All nations!
The rich!
The poor!
The L G B T Q!
The straight!
Men, women, and children!
All people, united in Christ!
Hosanna!
God save us!
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen!

Adapted from an original litany created by the Rev. George E. Calvert (1928-2005) while serving as Pastor of Church of the Son of Man and then Church of the Living Hope, East Harlem, NY.

Sermon

The Road into Jerusalem

Went to see my doctor this week, the one who saved my life in 2015.
I love him.
Whenever we are in the same space for 30 minutes, it's 28 mins of talk, 2 of exam.
We swap stories;
 he tells me how much his grandchildren love our Toy Park;
 he asks about the church; he tells tales about his temple.
This week our talk turns to folks distrusting each other,
 trends toward dehumanizing, disrespecting each other.
Doctor said when he was a little boy,
 just before new company was coming over,
 his mother confided to him in a whisper
 that their visitor was...a *vegetarian*.
The sanctity of their home was about to be shaken by an "Other," a...vegetarian!
My doctor as a little boy had no earthly idea what that meant;
 to his young ears it sounded ominous.
When the guest arrived--he looked normal from the outside--the child kept his
distance.

We follow a Loving God, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace who overcomes
distance,
 who loves you up close and personal,

who chose to walk among us and show us the Way,
the Way to abundant life and life everlasting.

*For God so loved the world that God sent the only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him. –John 3: 16-17*

The Son, known as Jesus of Nazareth, left the village of Bethany
and travelled into Jerusalem,
where Jesus knew He would be arrested and crucified.

In those days, the city of Jerusalem had a population of around 60,000.
This was the time of Passover, so the population had swelled to 300,000.
That is a lot of holiday traffic, a lot of feet trotting on the stone streets.
The Son of God entered Jerusalem through the East Gate,
which makes sense, having come along the road into Jerusalem from Bethany.
“The Old City of Jerusalem is surrounded by a wall containing eight major gates.

Moving counter-clockwise from the northern-most gate are
Herod’s Gate, the Damascus Gate, the New Gate, Jaffa Gate, Zion Gate,
the Dung Gate, the Eastern Gate, and the Lions’ Gate.
The Eastern Gate, facing the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley,
is unique in that it is completely sealed shut.

Some commentators see the Eastern Gate’s obstruction
as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy.
Ezekiel (46:12) and Zachariah (14:4) prophesied
the Prince of Peace will return to the Mount of Olives
and enter Jerusalem by way of the re-opened Eastern Gate
The “prince” to whom the gate will be opened
is seen as Christ Himself at the second coming.
So, for Jesus to enter into Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate
was to claim his inheritance.
His entrance made a public statement,
one that people who studied scriptures would get:
this Jesus is the Son of God.

On the opposite side of the city is the Jaffa Gate,
located on the west side of the historic city.
The Jaffa Gate is wide; it’s broad for a grand entrance.
The Roman Army made their entrances through the Jaffa Gate,
with war horses, chariots and a show of force
to intimidate the subjugated Hebrews.

So, if we talk power,
the Roman army's power is built on force and fear, intimidation;
Jesus Christ's power is built on faith and hope, inspiration.

Paul's letter to the Philippians states it best, sharing the lyrics of an early hymn:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the [Creator].* Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

This humble servant, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey,
through the Eastern Gate,
in direct contrast to Roman oppression and injustice,
emptied himself,
becoming obedient to the will of God, even death on a cross.

As Jesus rode along into Jerusalem,
people spread their cloaks on the road.
Approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives,
the multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice
for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,
*"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him,
"Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

Jesus answered, *"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."*—vs. 36-40

"order your disciples to stop"
"the stones would shout out"

We know Jesus spoke Aramaic and Hebrew; the Gospels were written in Greek.
The Greek word used here to describe the shouting action of the stones
is Κράξουσιν (kraxousin), which means to shout out, to cry out in anguish.
Imagine the slate and marble and cobble stones
that make up the city streets of Jerusalem
crying out in anguish, in pain, in emotional distress.
What could make the stones in our city streets so upset, so distressed?

What if God's creation – and yes, stones are a part of God's creation –
is groaning under the pain of witnessing human division and
misunderstanding?

We like to imagine that God came for us, for just us,
which is sweet, and narcissistic.

My Bible tells me that a Roman soldier at the base of the cross
acknowledged the man on the cross is the King.

Holy Scriptures teach us that a criminal on a cross on Calvary
accepted Jesus as Lord.

Could it be the stones know what we ignore,
that Jesus loves the ones who come in from the Eastern Gate
as well as the Jaffe Gate,
from all 8 gates, from every hamlet and village?

Jesus entered Jerusalem, yes, to save the Jews, yes, to save the Gentiles,
yes, to save the Samaritans, yes to save the Romans soldiers,
as well as the religious leaders who didn't believe in Him
and the tax collectors and sinners who did.

God's love is universal, unconditional, unfettered.

Every now and then—and maybe more often than that—
we need to be reminded how good we can be,
how good we are called to be,
that we are made by God,
made in the image of God,
who looks at you and sees you,
loves you and calls you good.

God bids us to join Jesus, to come forth and die,
to lay down our selfishness, our me-myself-and-I ness.

God's love is unconditional and universal;
it is also dangerous, because it calls us to discipleship.

50 years ago, a congregation I know and love in another town experienced a tragedy.
A young man in the church had been drafted into the US Army.

While fighting overseas in the Vietnam War, he was killed.
The pastor went to the family's home to sit with them, to pray and weep for their loss.
That same week another young man in the congregation
learned that he was about to be drafted into the US Army.
Being a conscientious objector, believing that resorting to violence was never a viable
option to resolve conflict, he departed and went to Canada.
The pastor went to the family's home to sit with them, to pray and weep for their loss.
On the following Sunday morning,
in the context of Christian worship,
the pastor prayed for two families in the congregation who had lost
sons.
After the benediction,
the leaders of the church met with and fired the pastor.

God's love is universal, unconditional, unfettered,
freely given for soldiers and peacemakers, Democrats and Republicans, Romans and
Gentiles, religious leaders and those who are done with church, for the ones in our tribe
and the ones to whom we have yet to say, "welcome home."

The stones beneath our feet know that we too easily, too quickly, too shamelessly
dehumanize our neighbors, especially people we don't know.
So many of our neighbors in the neighborhood want and crave
what is being shared here,
here in this significant faithful congregation of amazing folks.
I dare say that folks are sick to death of polarization.
Our neighbors crave this elusive thing called community.
[According to Disciples minister Holly McKissick]
Unchurched people want a spiritual faith community
but they are not interested in churches
that "are all hung up on gays or straight, black or white,"
but rather churches that celebrate the range of God's creation
and help each other through the difficult complexities of
life.

Many of our unchurched neighbors say,
"If I could find a church that isn't trying to own Jesus,
but simply follow him, I would go."
What they mean is that they dream of a sacred place, a safe place,
a spiritual home and community
where they could go with their questions and doubts
and still be accepted, like us.

If only they could find a church
that was not trying to divide the world but found a way to live together, like us.
If only they could find a church that wasn't trying to own Jesus
but simply follow him, like us.

If they could find a church like that, they would go!
We are a church like that,
 and you know this and feel this because you live this.
We've have experienced it firsthand;
 we can share this discovery;
 we can follow Jesus into Jerusalem
 and affirm that God's love is universal, unconditional, unfettered.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!