

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 (p. 951)

APRIL 10, 2022

LUKE 19:28-44 (p. 853)

BLAINE

PALM SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Guide our thoughts and meditations Lord. Fill us with your Spirit, the Spirit of Truth.

Open our minds Father, and soften our hearts, for we are indeed a stubborn people. And touch us, please, right now, with the power of your Presence, enabling each one of us to touch others in your Name. Amen.

“PALMS, PASSION, POWER, & POLITICS”

I'm going to take a walk on the wild side this morning! I'm going to talk about politics! I mean, why not? Everyone else is, right? So, why not from the Pulpit? There is a lot going on in the world. Things are happening just about everywhere you turn. Political things, and social things, even religious things! Things that will profoundly affect the future are unfolding right before our eyes! And people are talking about them, aren't they, sharing all kinds of opinions! Some are even taking up sides! Maybe you've noticed? So, I thought, why not just get it all out on the table, once and for all. Be specific, and clear. Share exactly what I see going on, right here and now!

Some of you just panicked, didn't you? And some of you thought, "Yes! Finally!" Well, I'm going to disappoint. I'm not going to talk about current politics. That would just be foolish. Besides, that's not really the purpose of the Church, no matter what you may have heard. No, I thought I'd talk about the politics in Jerusalem, roughly two thousand years ago, on what we call Palm Sunday, and just let you extrapolate from there!

The mood, as you can probably imagine, was pretty divisive. Much as it is today. There were factions, clusters of folks on one side of an issue, and others on the complete opposite side. That's probably not hard to imagine. And there were coalitions as well—people not necessarily in the same camp on all the issues, but banded together against what they perceived as a common threat from the other side.

The Scribes, for example, were loosely affiliated with the Pharisees. And they, in turn, were working with the Sadducees, who were collaborating with the Teachers of the Law. None of these people were on the exact the same page politically, or religiously for that matter, even within their own groups. There were different opinions and thoughts, and different priorities. But they all held a common cause. It was like a First Century, Jewish Political Action Committee! It's all about Abraham, for them! Temple Worship! Tradition! Moses and Elijah! And, of course, the Law!

Then you have the Roman Contingent on the other side of the aisle. These are Citizens of the Empire, followers of Caesar, who basically ruled the entire known world! That included Jerusalem, by-the-way, as well as all of Israel, most of Europe and North Africa! And let me tell you, Rome ruled with an iron fist! Historians say that in the First Century, upwards of one-third of the entire Roman population were slaves!

Over against these groups, you have the ever-growing Messianic Camp. These folks are also Jewish. A little less Traditional, you might say, maybe even a bit more Charismatic. But definitely Jewish. And this Party is expectantly awaiting the arrival of the Messiah!

Now some of the people in this coalition are from the Jesus Party, who right now seem to be having a party of their own! A huge crowd has gathered, and is currently streaming into Jerusalem shouting “Hosanna! Hosanna!”, “Save Us, God! Save Us!” You can almost feel it, can’t you? Excitement permeates the air!

According to Political Pundits like Luke, Jesus is riding into town majestically, on the back of a Colt! And as He does, a Sea of Coats and Cloaks, palm fronds and such, is unfolding before Him! The mood is one of Pomp and Circumstance, Festive Jubilation! This is quite the Celebration! But according to His Press Secretary, Paul—a later addition to this group—who is chained at the wrist to a Roman Soldier as he writes—Jesus is making His entrance Humbly and Unassumingly! Are you with me so far? Like I said, there is a lot going on!

Jesus is a relatively young Preacher, you know. Rabbis of His renown, are not normally in their thirties. Most are far older. And most don’t come from the far northern reaches of the Country either, let alone from Galilee, way up in the hinterland. The whole thing is rather strange! Exciting for the average person in Jerusalem, but rather strange! And this young Rabbi has been doing some pretty amazing things lately! In fact, the Headlines in the Jerusalem Gazette, for weeks now, can talk of little else! That’s the setting, the background. Now consider the Power Structure.

For the Romans, Caesar is clearly the king, clearly in charge! He is way over in Rome, but he has representatives here, like Pontius Pilate. And lots of soldiers to back him up! The Jews outwardly acknowledge this, of course, because they have too. But they secretly look to Herod as their king. He is a local guy. A bit rich and arrogant, but a local guy! And they want their Country back, their freedom, not to mention autonomous rule of their Nation! And those who look to the Messianic Prophecies in Scripture as their guide—who are waiting for the true, long-expected King, “King” with a capital “K”—well, according to some reports, many see Jesus, riding into town at the head of this parade, as the start of a potential Insurrection!

So, you have Caesar, and the most powerful army the world has ever known—the Religious Traditionalist, who hold the vast majority of the local population in the palm of their hand—and a Mob of Apocalyptic Visionaries—all converging on the Holy City of Jerusalem, headed for what will surely be a monumental conflict!

Can you picture it? It’s January sixth in Washington D.C.! Putin has complete military control of Crimea! The Power Brokers of the world are fully entrenched in their positions! And we are here, at the beginning of Holy Week!

But it goes even deeper. Into this potentially explosive political situation, you need to toss in the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Passover is the single biggest High Holy Day in the Jewish Faith! And it’s all about “Escape from Bondage” and “Freedom from Captivity”. So, that very thought is forefront on everyone’s mind!

There would have been tens of thousands of visitors pouring through the streets of Jerusalem that day, from all over the Middle East. According to some historians, hundreds of thousands! This is “the” celebration of God’s Providential Hand in the lives of His people! There would have been Worship and Traditions, along with extreme partying, like we do at Christmas, but on a far grander scale! It would be more like a Religious Spring Break on Steroids! Like I said, the people are commemorating their Nation’s “Release from Captivity”, “Freedom from Bondage”, celebrating “no more Political Oppression”, all by the Hand of God! And many, quite likely, are wondering if God is going to do it again! What you have, are all the makings of a Riot!

Some of the Worshippers are focused on God setting His people free, in the past! But some are expecting Messiah’s glorious arrival in power at any moment, to change the future! Some long for Messiah to come as a Conquering King, someone to “make Israel great again”! But others await Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant”, to restore Social Justice! The Political Establishment, of course, just want things to stay as they are. And the Romans don’t want any threat to their control!

There is a mix, isn’t there, of opinions and desires in the Holy Land! Of priorities and expectations! Of politics and history, intermingled with social and religious turmoil! And all swirled together with Prophecy, Prophecy concerning God’s ultimate plan!

I wonder if the Palms Fronds in the Parade were like Team Pendants, proudly waving during the procession through the streets, celebrating one particular camp? Or if they were more like banners, or graffiti maybe, angrily displaying Civil Disobedience, portending the start of the pending riot? Or if they were more like groundcover for the upcoming battle? Or if they were actually “D”, all the above? You have Palms and Passion, Power and Politics—all converging on the City of David! What do we do with that?

Prior to this moment in time, the Lion’s share of Jesus’ ministry has happened out in the countryside, mostly in Galilee, teaching and preaching and healing “elsewhere”. But now He is approaching the Capital, Jerusalem, along with everyone else. The Appointed Feast, the time ordained by God to commemorate the Exodus is just around the corner. One can’t help but think about throwing off the Yoke of Oppression. People are moving like a River of Humanity, flowing through the streets, and towards the Temple. Believers are praying for Salvation and Redemption! Countless goats are being led on tethers towards the Altar of Sacrifice! Sheep and birds! Children in tow! Young and old alike! There is a constant visual reminder, everywhere you turn.

And here comes Jesus, right into the midst of all this, doing something profound. “Go to the nearby village, and ‘borrow’ a colt”. That would have raised some eyebrows, don’t you think? How did He know a colt would even be there? Let alone the details of where and how? Or that the owner would just let Him take it? Who is this guy anyway?

Now remember, First Century Jews were far better at knowing Scripture than we are. They studied it every day! And memorized it! The Prophecy of Zechariah about Zion's Redeemer-King riding into town on a young colt, would have immediately come to mind! Believe me, the jaws of those watching would have dropped to the ground! "If anyone asks questions," Jesus continues, "tell them that the Lord needs it". That's "Lord", with a capital "L" by the way, a name reserved for Yahweh, Almighty God! Imagine the stir that statement would have caused.

It's here, at this moment that the crowds start to spread their cloaks on the road! It's here, that they begin reciting a Messianic Psalm of Redemption, Psalm 118! In spontaneous joy, the crowds start to sing the same Psalm that every member, of every family, sings at Passover, every year, in anticipation of Redemption! "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord"! Can you feel it?

Everyone, at least everyone on this side of town, is joyfully praising Almighty God in loud and rambunctious voices, rejoicing in all of the miracles they have seen. In celebration, they spread their cloaks on the road, and wave Palm branches high, shouting and singing and cheering. Exuberance doesn't even begin to describe the mood!

But then the Pharisees, the religious inner circle, the religiously powerful, the learned, start trying to shut them up! I can understand why they might be skeptical, or even discerning. They probably had a hard time accepting Jesus as the promised Redeemer. A lot of folks do, you know! Even with the Truth staring them in the face!

Maybe they are just being cautious? Or thoughtful? It does appear that they are concerned with what the Romans will think. “Teacher,” they say “rebuke your Disciples!” You see, to declare this Jesus fellow Lord, is to actually say, unequivocally, that no one, and nothing else is Lord! It does for us, right? There are political ramifications here, as well as religious ones, outcomes that simply cannot be foreseen! So, Jesus, why don’t you just quiet them down. Hide them away. You know, silence them. To which our Lord answers, “If the people are kept still, even stones will cry out!” It’s all pretty heady stuff!

This is the culmination, the finale, the final season of Jesus’ last week of earthly ministry! This is the climax of all the events leading up to this moment, the ultimate purpose for all that Jesus has done! Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and you all need to sit up and pay attention! That’s what folks are saying, right! Better yet, stand up and join in the revolution! Grab a Palm Frond everyone, and a megaphone, and let’s get going! Viva La Christos! Let’s change the world! It’s all quite grand! Can you feel it?

I’ve often thought that Jesus should have entered the city on the back of a Big Black Arabian Stallion! Or better yet, on a great big White one! You know, high-stepping the entire way! Only He doesn’t! I’ve often thought that He should be shouting out battle plans, setting up His troops! But He isn’t! He comes into the city humbly, riding on a colt! He lives out His next week humbly, not even crying out from a flogging, or from under a Crown of Thorns, or from up on a Cross where He was Crucified in our place! What does that say? What does that say to us?

Your attitude “should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”! Your mindset, the way that you think and feel, the way that you act, should be like that of your Lord! "Who being in very nature God, humbled Himself and became nothing, taking on the nature of a servant!" It's pretty clear, isn't it? The King of kings, the Lord of lords, Messiah, the Anointed One of God, stooped down and washed His Disciples feet! Almighty God Himself stepped down out of Glory, and into the world, into time itself, to suffer and die for the sins of humanity! I don't know about you, but I can hardly even get me head around that extraordinary Love and Compassion! Let alone live out my life accordingly! But I need to try, don't I! We all do!

So, do you have a visual for humility? A personal testimony maybe? Because I have a Classic! I've shared it before. In fact, I shared it with Pastor David just this week. But like I said, it's a Classic! It was a powerful time when God, in His infinite wisdom, gave me a glimpse of humility!

It was my very first Sunday as a Pastor! Ever! I had actually started working on Tuesday, the week before, April 1, 1997, to be exact, twenty-five years ago just this week. And believe me, the profound fact that it was April Fool's Day, did not escape me! Now it was Sunday though, and I had worked really hard preparing my very first sermon for my brand-new Church! Oh, I had preached a couple of times before—in seminary, in a huge, crowded, downtown Urban Cathedral—along the quiet shore of a Crystal Lake in front of only a handful of folks—even in my home Church as a layperson. This wasn't actually my first rodeo. But it did feel as if now, I was supposed to be the Head Clown!

And in all honesty, I was scared to death! My stomach was tied in knots! I kept thinking about Samson, using the jawbone of an ass to slay the Philistines. And I worried that I might use the same weapon when I spoke! But I felt a sense of accomplishment too, or purpose. I was sure that I was doing what God had asked me to do. It didn't feel like I was entering Jerusalem. No one was waving Palm Fronds and shouting joyously. But somehow, this felt like my entrance into the ministry!

I had poured over the texts, many times! I read every Commentary I could find, and lots of other people's sermons! I had a great illustration with which to start off! You know, to get everyone's attention, so we could begin tracking together! I wrote and re-wrote the entire sermon several times, tweaked and re-tweaked it, again and again and again! I even made Deb listen to it, a lot! You might want to pray for her!

But now we were in the car, on the way to our new Church home! There were four of us, Deb, Cassidy, Brady and Myself. My shirt was ironed and starched. I had combed my hair at least a dozen times. I had worried about everything I could possibly worry about! I'm sure I drove my family crazy! But I wanted to make a good first impression! I wanted to fulfill all worldly expectations!

Then, just a couple of miles from the Church, with only minutes to spare before we were supposed to make our grand appearance, the rubber gasket around the windshield in our car started working itself free!

I was driving a Dodge Intrepid at the time. Have you seen the size of the windshield on a Dodge Intrepid? It's huge! I'm not talking about a little piece of gasket here, poking out from under the glass! This thing was sixteen or twenty feet long! And in just minutes it stuck out like a sore thumb—three or four feet on each side of the car! And as we drove, it frantically waved at all the people!

My first concern, of course, was that the whole windshield would drop right into our laps! You could see the air gaps widening, and hear the wind rushing in! But we had a schedule to keep! We couldn't stop! They were expecting us at the Church! And then, my second thought hit! And it was even more overwhelming! How would this look! What would the people think? What would people think of me?

Suddenly I was sweating from every pore in my body! I had no idea what to do! My stress level was off the charts! And with my family roaring hysterically with laughter, the irony finally hit me! Or maybe it was the Holy Spirit!

Here I was, panicked over how I could preach Jesus Christ—humbly born in a manger, willingly walking to the Cross, obediently Crucified and Risen from the Grave—with all this happening to me! Here I was focused on me! When in truth, I should have been trusting in the One who can make even the Stones proclaim His Glory!

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who humbled Himself, and became a servant of all!” Your attitude! That’s the key, isn’t it? Your perspective, your mindset, your perception, your values, how you see things, the way that you look at, and react to the world, should line up perfectly with that of Jesus!

If He is your Lord, then our Call is clear. It may not be what we want to hear, but it is clear. Serve, as opposed to being served. Give, as opposed to receiving. Change your attitude, immediately. Be humble and obedient, just like your Lord! And remember, Humility is not “thinking less of yourself”! It’s “thinking of yourself less”! Point to God! Consider who gets the Glory! And all of God’s People said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, you hear our silent prayers, and you feel the deep desires of our hearts. So please reach out to us now, as we reach up to you. Take our hands Lord. Comfort us with your Presence, and with the power and might of your Holy Spirit. Smile upon us Father, and cause us to feel you near.

Lord, you know what we need, even better than we know it ourselves. You see things without the filters that we so often put in the way. So, it may seem silly to lift these prayers to you, for you already know what it is that will make us whole. And yet, Lord, we know that there is power in the asking. And we know that this is exactly what you have asked us to do. You have called each one of us to be in relationship with you, to count on you, in both good times and bad. Besides, you know the difference between our wants and our needs, something that is often illusive for us to discern. So please, grant to us now our needs, in the very ways, and at the specific times that we need them. Use both our losses and our gains in ways that Honor your Holy Name. And fill us, so that we might bravely, and humbly face the challenges that lay ahead. Shine into us Lord, so that we will shine out into your world!

Father, we know that you are in control of everything that happens! And we know that ultimately, all things work together for your Glory! And yet we face trials and tribulations in this life, and sometimes become quite scared! We get frightened Lord, and sometimes want to run and hide! We are sometimes tempted to give up too, Father! So please, come to us in these moments especially. Help us to feel you close. Help us to see your guidance. Empower us with your wisdom and your grace, so that we will know what paths to take. And convict us early, Lord, so that we won't wander too far away.

Father, this morning, as your Church, we lift up before you We ask you to touch these precious loved ones with your healing and comforting hand. Please strengthen them with your love, and protect them from all that they will face in the days ahead. And please, empower us to love them and support them as well. And to serve them, in your Name. We ask all these things in the Name of our Risen Lord, and with the prayer that He has taught us, saying, Our Father...