

***Images of the Cross: Upside-Down King***  
Palm Sunday

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Welcome to this week's communal worship service, even though we remain physically distant. It is our hope that this transcript and video will be a helpful way for us to stay connected during this time. Please remember that if you have any concerns, prayer requests, or praise items to share, you can always contact a pastor or deacon.

Similar to last week, we have created a playlist of our worship service that includes words of welcome, music, children's story, Scripture reading, sermon, and prayers. It has been a gift to have more people actively involved in leading our worship once again.

**Scripture Reading:** Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

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

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

The Word of God for the People of God

**Thanks be to God**

## **Sermon**

Things seemed quite bleak during Jesus' day. There were a lot of fairly significant reasons to feel anxious, fearful, even hopeless.

The Jewish people found themselves oppressed in their own land. Their country had been conquered and was currently being occupied by the Romans, who sought to make "peace" through the edge of a sword. Any resistance or attempts to revolt were met with swift and horrific retribution.

There was a wide chasm between those who were wealthy and those who were poor (with only about 10% of the population controlling over 2/3rds of the wealth). The vast majority of the population was a part of the peasant class. Many people worried about where their next meal would come from. Many struggled to find enough resources to stay alive, in large part due to the heavy taxation imposed by the Romans.

The leaders during this time cared much more about themselves, increasing their wealth, and gaining power, than they cared for the people they were tasked with ruling. The rulers of the various regions often fought with one another, which could have horrendous repercussions for the people in those regions, possibly resulting in people being forced into slavery, entire villages being mercilessly slaughtered, or having a new ruler placed over them who might be worse and more tyrannical than the previous one.

These were dark days for the Jewish people. They longed for deliverance from this foreign invasion that was spreading quickly throughout their land, wreaking havoc, killing many, creating scarcity and panic, and which was taking over so many different aspects of their life. They prayed and hoped and longed for God to deliver them from their current suffering and to set things right once and for all.

This was even more at the forefront of people's minds when Jesus processed into the city on a colt. He was one among thousands of pilgrims who were entering into Jerusalem to celebrate the

Passover. This was a time to remember God's miraculous act of deliverance when God freed the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt and led them through the parted waters of the Red Sea.

Passover was a time when Messianic hopes ran high. If God had acted in such a miraculous way before, the Jewish people hoped and prayed that God would once again act in such a way to free them from their current oppression and suffering. They longed for God to live up to the promises made to their forebears and to send an offspring of David – a Messiah – who would ascend to the throne and finally vanquish the enemies of Israel. They longed for one who would usher in a new age for God's people, an age of peace of prosperity where God's Messiah would rule with righteousness, wisdom, and might as one filled with God's Spirit.

All who were processing into the city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover shouted, "Hosanna!" which means, "God, save us!" They hoped that God would once again act swiftly and decisively to deliver God's people from their suffering, to rid them of their oppressors, and to make things right once and for all.

Well, God certainly acted. And yet, it was not at all in a way that anyone expected. They prayed for a mighty leader, yet God sent a servant. They prayed for a Divine Warrior, yet God sent One who proclaimed peace and love for enemies. They prayed for a King, yet the One that God sent did not look or act like any of the kings of this world.

God heard the cries of his people and God showed up in the midst of their pain and their suffering, yet the way God came was dramatically different from the ways the people had expected and hoped.

The Messiah that God had sent rode into the city as anticipation of the Passover and hope for God's deliverance mounted. Yet he did not ride on a magnificent warhorse, but on a colt, and a borrowed one at that. He did not come with a cavalcade of soldiers to destroy the unrighteous rulers who had been persecuting the Jewish people, but with a ragtag group of fishermen and peasants. He

and his followers did not come armed with swords, spears, or shields, but they came waving palm branches. If there was anything spectacular or splendid about this man, you would not know simply by looking at him as he entered the city.

In fact, it is possible that Jesus was hardly noticed at all, as there were thousands streaming into the city to celebrate the Passover. The sight of this small, unobtrusive, and seemingly ordinary band of Jesus and his disciples may not have attracted much attention at all in the midst of the excitement of the mounting festivities. It's possible that the cries of "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" that accompanied Jesus' entry into Jerusalem weren't even predominantly aimed at him. The cries of "Hosanna! God, save us!" were derived from Psalm 118, a text that was chanted every year as a regular part of the Passover celebration as they remembered God's act of deliverance. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" was not a new proclamation either. This was something that people would shout to anyone who entered the city to celebrate the Passover, as all pilgrims were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate in the name of the Lord. It is possible that the vast majority of people who streamed into the city even as they longed desperately for God's deliverance didn't even notice that God's Messiah was in their midst.

For Jesus didn't come in the way that the people had expected. Jesus didn't show up or look like or act in the ways that the people had hoped. Jesus didn't seem to bring the dramatic and miraculous deliverance that they had been praying for, but he brought deliverance nonetheless.

God heard the cries of his people. God acted once again to save God's people, yet this happened in such a way that many wouldn't have even noticed or recognized. God brought about the deliverance that the people had prayed for, even though it did not come as they had hoped.

Things seem quite bleak these days. There are a lot of fairly significant reasons to feel anxious, fearful, even hopeless.

A pandemic has spread across the face of the earth, wreaking havoc, killing many, creating scarcity due to panic and fear, and forcing dramatic changes in so many different aspects of our lives. Many who otherwise would have lived out the rest of their days, have had their lives tragically cut short. Many who have loved ones who have contracted the virus are fearful and anxious about whether or not they will recover. Healthcare workers are overwhelmed and exhausted and are succumbing to the virus in a disproportionate rate from the rest of the population. Many have been laid off or are unable to go to work because of quarantine regulations, and therefore are worried about how they will continue to make ends meet with no source of income. All that once felt so familiar has now changed drastically. People are living in fear because we have absolutely no idea what the future may hold, how long this may go on, or how life will be changed once it has run its course.

We are praying and hoping and longing for God to act decisively to bring about healing and deliverance from these dark and fearful days. We long for this to end, for things to go back to normal, to be able to gather in person with friends and loved ones, to lay aside our fears and anxieties, and we pray for God to act in order to bring this about. Many of us desire to see tangible, noticeable ways that God is indeed acting and bringing healing to all who need it. Many of us feel a deep need to be assured that God is still with us and helping us in this time of trouble as the earth is changing and the very foundations of the world seem to be shaken.<sup>1</sup> We are crying out for God to once again act in monumental and miraculous ways to bring healing and deliverance from the world's deep suffering and fear.

Well, God certainly hears the cries of his people. God is here, present in the midst of the world's suffering, even though God may not be showing up or acting in the ways that we were expecting. And

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<sup>1</sup> Reminiscent of Psalm 46:1-2.

God is certainly at work in our lives and in the world to bring about healing and deliverance, even though this may not come or look like what we have prayed or hoped for.

When I met online with the youth this past Wednesday, I asked them where they are experiencing and seeing God in the midst of all that is happening. They shared about the ways that they are experiencing God's presence through time with family and pets, through conversations with peers, through time spent outside, and through paying attention when people are helping others. Their encounters of God were in ordinary interactions, seemingly insignificant things that might even go unnoticed if one wasn't paying attention.

God may not come in the ways that we are expecting. God may not act in the ways that we are hoping. God may not bring the dramatic and miraculous healing and deliverance that we are praying for, but God is bringing healing and deliverance nonetheless.

God hears our cries. God is present in our midst, even (or perhaps especially) in places and situations where the suffering is immense. God is speaking words of peace into our fearful and anxious hearts. God is still our refuge and strength, a very present help in these troubling times, even when the earth is changing and it feels as though the very foundations of the earth are shaken.<sup>2</sup> God is with us, and God is bringing about the deliverance and healing that we are praying and hoping for, even when this looks different from what we were expecting.

May the grace of God, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and the peace of Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- On this Palm Sunday, what comes to mind for you as you think about Jesus' procession into Jerusalem? (consider meaningful rituals, past worship services or past teachings/Bible studies on this passage, past Palm Sunday experiences, etc.)
- Do you think it more likely that the other people processing into Jerusalem believed Jesus to be the Messiah or that he entered into the city unnoticed by many? Why?

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2 Reminiscent of Psalm 46:1-2

- What is it that you are praying, hoping, and longing for God to do during this time of fear and suffering due to the pandemic? How might God be answering your prayers (even if this may not look exactly as you had hoped)?
- How have you experienced or seen God during this past week? Are there times, places, or situations when God has felt absent or where it has been more difficult to notice God's presence?
- Psalm 46 was briefly referenced twice during this sermon. You are invited to read through this passage. What strikes you? What words or phrases stand out to you? How might God's Spirit be speaking to you through this psalm considering the world's current circumstances?
- Spend time in prayer. Pray for eyes to see God's presence and healing, even in the midst of suffering, even when God doesn't show up as we were expecting or hoping. Pray for strength to trust that God is still active and present in times of suffering and fear. Praise God for being our refuge and strength, and a very present help in times of trouble.

### **Congregational Prayer:** Pastor Rosie

Dear friends,

It is good to be back with you. I am healing from surgery and am getting back to work this week. In some ways, I've been pre-occupied with my recovery, doing daily wound care and resting to regain my strength. Now that I'm 3 weeks post-surgery the pandemic is front and center. We are inundated with the horror of this raging disease every time we read or listen to the news. We wonder if this will ever end and we long to return to normal living. I hear you. I'm with you in this lament.

I'm reminded of the Israelites when they were captured from the way things were and sent away into exile. They were ripped out of their comfort and suddenly found themselves weeping by the waters of Babylon, remembering Zion, wondering how things could ever be normal again. How could they worship God and sing songs in a foreign land?

This disease has taken over our world, and it threatens to hold us captive. How can we continue to worship and sing songs of freedom and joy with so much change and despair in our communities and world?

Dear church, we must sing. We must pray. We know that God's presence is with us, no matter where we are and no matter what is happening around us. In the midst of this world-wide pandemic we must hold fast to God's promise that God will never leave us alone.

On this Palm Sunday, let us come together as never before; let us kneel, stand, sit, fall face down – in whatever posture is comfortable for you and let us proclaim Jesus as our healer and our King.

We are not alone, God is with us.

Come, let us join together in prayer:

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home.  
Under the shadow of thy throne, Still may we dwell secure;  
Sufficient is thine arm alone, And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood, Or earth received her frame,  
From everlasting, thou art God, To endless years the same.

A thousand ages, in thy sight, Are like an evening gone;  
Short as the watch that ends the night, Before the rising sun.

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come;  
Be thou our guide while life shall last, And our eternal home.<sup>3</sup>

We pray this through your son, Jesus Christ, the one who came, the one who comes, the one who is always with us, and the one who sees us, hears us, and knows us; and who is actively present and working in the world even as we speak our prayers. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Benediction:** Friends, we are not alone, God is with us!

Receive now these words of benediction from the Apostle Paul (with a slight adaptation):

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things yet to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation, **(not even the coronavirus)**  
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”<sup>4</sup>

Amen. Have a blessed Sunday. Go in peace.

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<sup>3</sup> Songwriters: PAUL MICKELSON, WILLIAM CROFT  
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<sup>4</sup>Rom. 8:38-39