

# No Parade?

A Written Sermon for Palm Sunday 2020

John 12, Philippians 2, and Isaiah 50

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Today for the first time in decades, centuries maybe even, sanctuaries across America are not filled with worshippers waving palms. Today is the beginning of Holy Week, the Covid-19 pandemic can't stop it from coming. Nor can it stop Christ from coming. But this pandemic is forcing us to look deeper into what Christ may have thought about as he decided it was time for him to face the cross.

John's gospel, the one deeply focused on helping us understand Jesus is the Christ, is the briefest.

"The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the king of Israel!'

"Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, 'Don't be afraid, Daughter Zion. Look! Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.'" (John 12:12-15 quoting Zechariah 9: 9)

The early church knew Christ's triumphal entry story well when the Apostle John wrote his gospel, living in exile during the last years of his 94 years long life. The first believers worshipped and served as the Gospel writers were still being inspired. One wonders if they had a Parade of Palms, but do we know they had hymns. The Church has always sung its faith. Paul quoted one hymn when he wrote the church in Philippi while writing in prison around 64 A.D. (Plus or minus 4 years, Paul was already martyred by the time Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D. and John with other Christians was forced into exile.) Paul wrote "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus," and then quoted the hymn.

"Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.  
But he emptied himself  
by taking the form of a slave  
and by becoming like human beings.  
When he found himself in the form of a human,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:5-8)

In their worship while the New Testament was still being inspired and written, the early church relied heavily on the Old Testament for their Scripture. In Isaiah's "servant songs," they recognized the prophecies that God would send his Promised One, the Christ. Some of these servant songs we know well because we read them during Advent, and they are the foundation Scripture for Handel's Messiah. The servant song the Church has linked with Holy Week is found in Isaiah 50:4-13. My study Bible has titled it "The Servant's Humiliation and Vindication."

This week in sermon preparation, I used *Lectio Divinato* to discern what is mine to preach this week. The first verse that spoke was from Philippians, "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus," and to go with it, this one on Christ's attitude from Isaiah:

"The Lord God will help me;  
therefore, I haven't been insulted.  
Therefore, I set my face like flint,  
and knew I wouldn't be ashamed." (Isaiah 50:7, underscore mine.)

Can you imagine Christ Jesus in those seconds before he got on that donkey thinking, or maybe even saying aloud, that verse from Isaiah? We know Jesus memorized passages from Isaiah, he quoted them in his public speaking. We know he prayed the Psalms, some of what we call his last words are quotes from Psalms. In the first century, there was no internet, there was no printing press, there were no dusty family Bibles waiting to be read as we turn to the Bible on our smartphones. There were only scrolls, copied by hand and passed from synagogue to synagogue. To carry the Scripture in the first century, Jesus, Paul, and John all memorized what they read in worship and study. For them the Word of God was literally written on a human heart.

As we think about the attitude Christ embodied as he rode that donkey colt into Jerusalem, we might imagine it was the line "The Lord God will help me." So easy to read. So challenging to live. But Christ accepted the challenge and mounted the donkey colt. The people waved palms. The leaders grew angrier. But Christ Jesus knew the Lord God would help him.

I suspect that in our Sunday evening broadcast local news a Christian will make sure we see reports of churches being creative with the palms and perhaps a national news report about a local church defying staying "Safer at Home" orders from their governor. While I hope we might make the local news with our outdoor palm drive-by, it is pretty safe to assume the best national coverage our podcast service might get is you sharing the link to our podcast worship on your Facebook page.

But news coverage is not to be our measure of what it means for us to believe and embody the idea that "The Lord God will help me." The judgement of our

effectiveness belongs to Christ and always hinges on how well we followed him by “loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.” The Lord God will always help us love as Christ loved us.

Right now, we can combine two actions as we love our neighbors. First we pray and then we simultaneously cooperate with what the CDC and Governor Evers ask us to do.

Prayer is always our best way of loving our neighbors. Prayer never goes off our to-do list of caring. Monday morning as instruction in the Hudson Unified School District began online, I drove to first the Middle School campus and then our High School campus driveways to pray for our teachers and students. Both driveways were barricaded with signs that read “Hudson Schools are closed.” I wish they had said, “Hudson Schools’ buildings are closed,” because as I prayed and snapped pictures for this sermon, it came to me that instruction was going on. Teachers and students were doing their work. School was in session, just not in the building. The Lord God is helping each student and teacher as they all contribute to flattening the curve of this pandemic.

Monday evening scrolling through my Facebook feed, I found this Paul Williams Instagram post on cooperating with orders like “Safer At Home:”

“When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don’t say to yourself, ‘It looks like the end of the world.’ What you’re seeing is love in action. What you’re seeing, in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, for our immune-compromised brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet.

“People will lose jobs over this some will lose the businesses. And some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment, when you’re out on your walk, or on your way to the store, or just watching the news, to look into the emptiness and marvel at that love.

“Let it fill you and sustain you. It isn’t the end of the world. It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness.” (Instagram paulielama2, Facebook 03/30/2020.)

This year, we don’t have a parade in our sanctuary—we have a palm sharing in our parking lot. This year, we don’t gather for worship—our sanctuary has become our studio for sharing the Good News of Christ on-line. This year we will have the mind of Christ and join with all humanity to love the neighbors Christ came to redeem.

Is our effort working? Yes, it is! Thanks be to God! On Saturday morning with then new CDC recommendation that we all start wearing cloth masks when we are in public—mostly at the grocery and sanctuary recording sessions for my family—I did a little research both on sewing masks and our shared progress in flattening the curve. When I watched news from the Twin Cities, I saw that we now have over 2000 Covid-19 cases reported in Wisconsin. But when I went to the St. Croix County website that reports our infection rates, I saw that only 7 of those cases are in our county, an increase of only 3 cases since I first looked on March 13, 2020. So where are the other 1993 cases? According the state of Wisconsin’s page, most are in Milwaukee County, almost 50% of the currently reported cases. Other higher counties are Dane, Waukesha, Racine, and Kenosha; essentially the I-94 corridor connecting both the Twin Cities and Chicago to shipping on Lake Michigan. There is also an arc of counties across Wisconsin to our north that have no reported Covid-19 cases yet. Our basic Midwestern values of neighborliness are “flattening the curve.” Our participation is both a faithful following of Christ and good citizenship.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us “adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2) knowing “the Lord God will help us.” (Isaiah 50) It isn’t joining the palm parade in the sanctuary that makes us Christians. The real parade following the Risen Christ is ours today as we now wear our masks and sing, “In Christ alone my hope is found . . .” (#3105, *Worship and Song*, Abingdon Press, Nashville. 2011.)

Amen.