

“What Are You Doing, Jesus?”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
March 28, 2021 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

John 12:12-16

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

What do we do when we know someone important is going to be coming? We make sure all the preparations are in place. We want to see them arrive. When the president comes to our city or a foreign dignitary comes to visit our nation, I am sure there are things that the secret service people have to do to prepare. Have you ever met a loved one at the airport with a welcome sign? My daughter and her boyfriend came from Louisville this past Thursday to drop off their dogs before they left on vacation. I changed the sheets and put up a welcome sign for their quick night stay with us. I even bought special chew bones for the dogs!

Today in our scripture, we hear of the preparation of the people, who have come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. They have learned that Jesus will be coming as well. They make plans to welcome him with palm branches. When they see him arrive, they shout greetings of great honor. “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel!”

In the Gospel of John, we hear that Jesus takes charge of getting his own donkey. He does not ask the disciples to do it with instructions to untie the colt or to tell the people when asked why are they taking it that the Lord needs it like in the other Gospel readings. This also mirrors the words of the prophet Zachariah, “*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*”

In the midst of excitement of the triumphant parade, scripture tells us that the disciples did not understand all this at first. The king of Israel arrives in Jerusalem and thus begins the story of Holy Week. As Jesus takes charge of getting his own ride, the Gospel of John turns the focus of the week directly to him. He is in control. The disciples cannot change what will happen to Jesus moving forward in the story.

Perhaps our scripture today is inviting us to step into the shoes of the disciples. As we join with the crowd singing our “Hosannas,” do we sing with enthusiasm or do we wonder how this will end? Can we forget that we have the luxury of knowing the end of the story?

The disciples do not know about the Last Supper, when Jesus will prepare a special meal for them and give them the bread and the cup, saying do this in remembrance of me after I leave you. He washes their feet, when Peter will resist Jesus. The disciples do not know about the promise of sending the Holy Spirit once he is gone and that he will go to prepare a place for them where there will be many rooms. Thomas questions him on how will he know how to get there. The disciples do not know that Jesus will be arrested and the horrors that will follow. They do not know the brutality of the cross and that they will watch him breathe his last breath saying, “It is finished.”

We have received our palms in preparation to begin our Holy Week. With every step we take this week, can we ask, “What are you doing, Jesus?” There may be parts of the story as we hear it

being told or read that we may want to change or skip over it. I remember when the movie “The Passion of Christ” came out I didn’t want to see it. After I had the courage to watch it, I never wanted to see it again. It was hard to watch all that Jesus went through to show his passion for us. I can’t imagine what the disciples thought. It is no wonder that they didn’t understand. After all, this was their dear friend, who they loved and followed for three years. He was the king, who was to come with power and might to overturn the Roman government. Why would he go into Jerusalem with such fanfare knowing that the church officials wanted him arrested?

It is no doubt that this week’s events took them from fear and pain to arrive at the empty tomb with hope and joy. In the end, the disciples were able to reflect back on the drama that played out before their eyes and they could tell that Jesus was living out scripture. At the empty tomb, they were able to celebrate and glorify him.

After the year that we have had, it is no wonder that we would be reluctant to want to go through more grieving and loss before we arrive on Easter morning. The Rev. Kory Wilcoxson warns us to not fold up our parade lawn chairs and go home.

<https://revkory.wordpress.com/2010/03/28/palm-sunday-sermon-cheers-and-tears/>

As we go through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and we wait on Saturday wondering what Jesus will do next, let us ponder and hold on boldly to our faith. Cynthia Rigby invites us, *“Be listeners and enter into the details of each scene with the storyteller, so that you can find your way into the story – whether as enthusiasts or skeptics – and be transformed by it.”* (Connections – A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship; Year B, Volume 2; Westminster John Knox Press; 2020; p. 117)

There have been many times this past year, I have wondered what is God doing or what is Jesus doing? This week we have heard on the news about another violent act in Boulder, Colorado, where a shooter killed ten people in a grocery store. These were people, who had come to work or pick up a gallon of milk. We find ourselves still in the midst of the pandemic. Our own personal news is that Frank is leaving us in a couple of months. We find our congregation feeling disjointed from the pandemic where some of us have worshiped in person and others have worshiped online.

We are asking, “What are you doing, Jesus? What will you do next?” We would like to skip over the hard parts. We sure don’t want to endure the hard work of going through saying good-bye to Frank. We don’t really want to go through the time of the Interim Pastor. Many of you have gone through this before and can share how tough it was. I have heard many say that it was long and tedious work. It took patience and faith. It involved great courage to stay and live through the story. We will have to look at John Knox and ask, “Where is the church now?” “What does God want for the future of the church?” Our book study made a great point this past week, “The church is the people not the building or the pastors.”

I have also heard many ask, “How will we celebrate the blessing of Frank, Debbie and the girls?” We want to celebrate and show our gratitude to them and to God for our time together. We heard Frank share last week and I agree that the time of the Interim prepared the way. It transformed this congregation so that it welcomed eighteen years of great, life changing ministry.

As we wave our palms today, help us to go bravely through this week of transformation. As we prepare to celebrate Frank’s ministry at John Knox on May 16th, help us, dear Jesus, to be your faithful disciples to bravely roll up our sleeves and live into the stories that come afterwards so that we can glorify you as we are your faithful disciples.

I want to close with a poem by Ann Weems titled:

“From Hosanna to Horror, the Only Road to Easter.”

Balloons maybe. If Jesus were coming here, maybe we'd line up on either side of his parade route, and wave balloons as he passed. Back and forth . . . a multitude of colors, and we'd probably shout Yea! instead of Hosanna, and we'd hold up homemade posters saying, "Welcome, Jesus!" and as he passed by . . . probably in one of those bubble-top cars because the FBI would not want to be left out of this one . . . On the other hand maybe he'd refuse and ride that donkey after all or maybe even walk down the middle of the road with balloons bobbing as he walked, he'd wave to us and bless us. And we'd follow, and follow and follow. What a celebration! What a Festival of Faith that would be! And when the parade passed by, we'd finally go home, and look forward to the celebration next Sunday.

But what about Holy Week? The days lengthen, the pear tree flowers white outside my kitchen window . . . In the mysterious Lenten mix of lament and hope the taunting, blood splattered face of war screams into our lives, and we are tempted to despair. The TV bleeds and explodes and the unspeakably obscene inhumanity of war blares into our ears and our hearts — and we turn and run. Into a wall — the same wall we visit each Lent — trying to get around a Gate called Truth, trying to go from Palm Sunday straight to Easter morning, trying to keep from going into that courtyard where we must answer whether we know him or not, trying to keep from going anywhere near that cross. So give us the palms and give us a parade, but O God, whisk us right from Palm Sunday to that "great getting-up morning." Have our Easter baskets filled and waiting for us, O God, because this year we're tired and we're scared and we just want a little peace and quiet. And so we turn and run or we kneel and pray for mercy and for miracles and the eyes to see this Jesus named Emmanuel, the eyes to see that God is with us.