

Community Church of Issaquah

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Celebrating Palm Sunday

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Before I begin, I must confess that there is always a hesitation and dread for me when the Lenten Season comes to an end and Christians begin what we know to be Holy Week. Oh, it isn't because I was always aware that as a minister I would have 8 days of really hard work to make the Easter Season pleasant for all those in my congregation and more. The truth is that my dread came from knowing that when I began to share the real truth about this most significant event in our Scripture, it would tarnish what so many had been taught about Easter. Yes, I know it's a bright time to talk about bunnies and colored eggs and baskets of treats and ham lunches and so much more. And it was never my intention of darkening that celebration. I simply wanted then and I still want now for those of us who are followers of Christ to have a clearer and more meaningful understanding of what really happened during this final week of the earthly life of Jesus. So, can I tell you what actually happened without ruining your Easter experiences? I hope so.

We must begin our study by understanding what life was like in that time of the Scriptures we read today. Jesus lived in a village called Nazareth in the area of Galilee where he taught in the temple or center of spiritual learning. There he was known as the "rabbi" which simply means "teacher." He traveled to nearby villages to do the

same. Keep in mind that Jesus was a brown skinned Arab and a Jew, not the White Protestant we see in art and history. All of this territory in which Jesus lived and ministered was part of the Roman occupied land that had been under the rule of militant oppressors. To paint a picture of how dominant and controlling the Romans were, let's reflect on the days about 80 years before Jesus' journey to Jerusalem for his final days. At that time before Jesus dwelt in this area the people of Galilee rose up to resist the dominant rulers. In order to defeat this uprising of Jews in Galilee, the Romans were merciless, destroying cities, including Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee. Returning to Jerusalem in triumph they captured and crucified more than 2000 Jews who were accused of being a part of the rebellion. It was a massive show of power and warned the Jews about what would happen if anything like that happened again.

It was this fear of repeating that horror that was the underlying factor in the reluctance of Jews to oppose the status quo of Roman rule. When Jesus proclaimed that he was the promised Messiah, his followers mistakenly thought this would be the path to overthrowing the suppressive Roman regime and reclaiming their land and freedom. At least, that was their hope.

When Jesus made known his plans to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem, his closest followers tried to dissuade him from doing so believing it would lead to an open conflict with both the governing leaders and the religious leaders. But do you know why Jesus and others were making the journey to Jerusalem at that time? To instigate a

rebellion? No, it was simply because it was Passover - the Jewish celebration of deliverance from slavery in Egypt back into their Promised Land. Maybe you are familiar with the tradition in which devout and able Muslims try to make a hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. This celebrates the final month of the Islamic calendar. In a similar way, the entourage accompanying Jesus believed this was their promised and blessed visit to the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover. It wasn't an unplanned or random vacation like many believe. It served a purpose.

The Roman leaders were well aware that many pilgrims would be coming to Jerusalem to observe this important tradition of Passover. Pilate, the governor of this region knew it was expected of him and a standard practice that the Roman governor had to be in the capital during all religious celebrations. Passover was one of only a few Jewish festivals that the Romans allowed to take place. It shouldn't be a surprise then that Pilate had scheduled a grand entrance into the city with his massive army and would take residence at the Roman fortress that was located adjacent to the Jerusalem Temple compound. This was to be a show of force to intimidate any idea of an uprising and to let Jews know exactly who was in control.

As Jesus and his band of followers made their way from Galilee toward Jerusalem, a trip of several days, they neared the village of Bethphage which was on the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem. As they approached, Jesus chose two of his disciples and instructed them to go ahead of the crowd into the village. He said, as we find in the

passage from Luke 19 verses 30 and 31, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If you are asked why you are doing this, say that the Lord needs them.”

This was not a random idea or some way to make the trip easier for Jesus. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, the prophet says, “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Faithful Jews knew this prophecy well and knew what it meant when Jesus chose to enter the city of Jerusalem on the donkey. They believed that Jesus, the promised one, would lead them to freedom as their new king. He would be the one to lead them to deliverance from the Romans. At least that was their hope as they gathered in large numbers to accompany their hoped for new king into Jerusalem.

When the entourage came down from the Mount of Olives and drew close to their entry into Jerusalem at the Eastern Gate, ironically, Pilate and his military forces were entering the city from the Western Gate. One show of force and power and one show of humility and prophecy. As the crowd of disciples and followers came down the road from the Mount of Olives, they began to loudly praise God in loud voices to remember all the miracles they had seen and heard about from this man named Jesus. They yelled over and over, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

They removed their cloaks and spread them on the ground before Jesus riding on that donkey. Others took branches from nearby trees and spread those on the ground to make the entry into Jerusalem more akin to the arrival of a king. With each step, the crowd grew louder, the praises more passionate, and the crowd grew and grew and grew. They came to see and celebrate this rabbi that they had heard so much about who was their hoped for new king.

In a panic, some of the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him to rebuke his disciples. "Tell them to be quiet," they pleaded. Their fear was that the chaos and noise would alert Pilate and there would be repercussions for their actions. Calmly, Jesus stood before them and said, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." As the crowd moved closer to the East Gate of Jerusalem, the Gospels record the sad picture of Jesus stopping to see the city and weeping at the sight that he knew would one day fall. He then made a profound prophecy that years after his death and resurrection sadly came true.

His words were, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." Sadly, years later Jerusalem was destroyed, Jews were persecuted

and what we now call the diaspora caused them to flee to other corners of the known world, away from their home.

There were two sets of voices on that pilgrimage into Jerusalem. There were those who loudly proclaimed their belief in Christ as the Promised Messiah, and those who asked Jesus to tone things down. Which set of voices are we engaging in today? Are we the loud proclaimers of God's goodness and mercy? What happens then if we stop raising our voices? Even worse, what would happen today if we did the same thing that the disciples and followers did with their voices? Oh wait, do you know what happened next? Let me tell you.

Many who had raised their voices of praise to God as they followed Jesus were quickly silenced by the fear of what the Romans would do if they were heard. And some, who were disappointed that Jesus did not immediately instigate a rebellion changed their minds and they were the ones at the time of Jesus' capture and trial whose message became "Crucify him! Crucify him!" These were the same followers and disciples who had made the journey with Jesus for Passover celebrations in Holy Jerusalem. Even the disciples were overcome with fear and went into hiding. Silence. No voices talking of God's deliverance. Just silence.

That gives a new meaning to Jesus' response to the Pharisees about the rocks or stone shouting out. What happens when followers of Christ cease to raise their voices for the teachings of Jesus. We all know the messages. Stay out of the public eye. Stay away from anything

controversial. Just stick with religion. Go to church. Sing old hymns, pray hard, save souls and count the number of converts. But for God's sake, do that inside the church and do it quietly.

Palm Sunday and this Holy Week should remind all of us that the work of the church is not just the church, but the world. Those of us who have given ourselves to the church must always raise our voices to proclaim that our first priority is the world. The world that God loves and the world for which Jesus Christ gave his life. That is the voice we must raise, and that is the voice that is being drowned out by those who begin with loud praises to God, then change their tune to be more aligned with the voices of power. The question we all must answer is, "What is it that we cannot stay quiet about?" Do you have an answer to that? Do you?

I want to leave you this morning with a quote from George MacLeod of the Church of Scotland and founder of the Iona Community:

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as the steeple of the church. Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap, at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in Hebrew and Latin and Greek. . .at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about, and that is where church people ought to be and what church people ought to be about."

During this Holy Week, my hope is that you and I will experience the reality that as Jesus came from his safety in Galilee to the heart of Jerusalem and its unknown ending, may he come to each of us – you and me – from the safe places of our lives where we often wish he would stay to our hearts where he seeks an entrance and seeks a faithful response from you and me – our love, our commitment, and our voices.

Would you join me in prayer?

Lord, we ask that you push us boldly and eagerly into life. Pull us away from our easy comfort and out into the difficult struggles of others. Send us into the world where we can work to rid the world of hate and evil. Lead us into those fields where others who came before us have thrown down the gauntlet to find solutions for poverty, ignorance and fear. In this world of great need, open our eyes and minds and hearts to know that these needs are right here in front of us. We need only to look around. Call us with a voice that we cannot disregard. Challenge us to resolve the unfinished tasks of our own lives and hearts. Make this our mission and give us the vision to wisely follow your calling. Lead us to raise our voices so that the world will hear your message of love and hope. May we be loud and clear and unafraid of being heard.

We offer this our prayer in the name of Jesus, who could see the cross at the end of his earthly life and yet still said, "We must go up to Jerusalem."

Amen and amen.