

Community Church of Issaquah  
Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024

## On a Mission with Jesus

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Today, Palm Sunday, begins what in the Christian faith is called Holy Week. This is the eight days that end with the resurrection of Jesus. In many churches, there are spiritual events that take place almost every day. The best known of those are today, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. These days mark the end of the Lenten Season which we have been observing since it began way back on Ash Wednesday (which was on Valentine's Day this year). All the time anyone might have spent in reflection about the upcoming death and resurrection of Christ has narrowed down to these days of reality and seriousness. There is much for us to wrap our heads around when we begin the journey through this week. But this will be a beautiful experience if we allow the message and teachings to dwell in our hearts and on our minds.

We must begin our reflection of these days of Holy Week 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." His earthly father, Joseph, was a carpenter. Whether Jesus learned and followed that trade is not known in the Bible. We know only that he began his earthly ministry at the age of

30. Perhaps his early life as a devout Jew was the basis of this desire to teach and minister at the temple he knew.

Jesus began to travel to nearby villages to do the same – teach and minister. Keep in mind that Jesus was a brown skinned Arab and a Jew, not the White Protestant we see in art and history. His people were akin to what we know now as Middle Eastern Arabs or Palestinians. 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' birth and life in this area the people of Galilee had arisen to resist the dominant Roman 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 occurred again. The similarity of this and what is happening in Gaza illustrates how history continues to repeat itself in the Holy Land.

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. They believed him to be the new king or ruler who had come to lead them into victory against the Romans. At least, that was their hope.

When Jesus told his disciples of 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 Jesus and others were making the journey to Jerusalem at that time to be faithful to their own religion. It was not to instigate a rebellion. It was simply because it was Passover - the Jewish celebration of deliverance from slavery in Egypt and their returning 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. In preparation of his show of control, 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.

If you and I are followers of Christ as Christians, we are on a mission. Those followers who welcomed him to Jerusalem might have missed the meaning of why Jesus was coming to that city in the first place. He was on a mission to be faithful to his religion, to observe the event of Seder or the Passover. He had brought his disciples with him because he loved them and wanted to be with them on that sacred night. That was his mission. And it’s our mission. We as followers are called to join Jesus in observing our own faith traditions which lead us to worship a loving and living God. That’s our mission.

Those who misunderstood Jesus’s mission were the ones who turned their backs on him. They believed his mission was rebellion, and it was that misunderstanding that led them to betray Christ and seek his death. Jesus wasn’t betrayed and placed on trial and then executed because he was on a mission of his faith or even to offer his life as a sacrifice for forgiveness. He was crucified for political and

false religious reasons to get him out of the picture. Judas did not betray Jesus to keep him from observing Passover. It was all about politics and money. That was their mission, but it is not ours.

As I said earlier, our mission is to be faithful followers of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When we come to this place of worship during this Holy time, our mission is to rejoice that we are on the right path of following the one who leads us. We are to rejoice that even though Jesus was crucified by hate, he overcame that, and God used his death to fulfill His promise of redemption and eternal life for those who believe. Let us begin a mission this week of celebrating the life of this one faithful man whose death turned a dark and frightening event into a true miracle of joy, new life, and victory over evil.

I would like to close the service today with a quote from George MacLeod of the Church of Scotland that I shared last year and is still relevant.

*“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.”*

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.*