

BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD

Palm Sunday
March 24, 2024

Today is Palm Sunday. The official title is “Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday”. The title is meant to remind us that Jesus’ triumph over death, and the jubilation of his resurrection must be balanced and brought down to earth with the reality of his suffering and death.

Over the next seven days the whole story of salvation will be on vivid display; including the fickleness of humanity, Jesus servanthood, his suffering, death and resurrection. Every service, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Easter Vigil, and Easter Sunday, will be a reminder to us, of the price the love of God was willing to pay for our redemption.

As we move into Holy Week, let me as your pastor, encourage you to not walk too quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. There may be many things in your life speeding up the pace of life. As one of our northern lights, you may be preparing for a return north. You may be busy with family activities and church activities. But in the potential busyness of this week ahead, I ask you to slow the pace down a bit, so that you can get the most out of these next seven days, these days that are the core of our Christian faith.

I’m asking you to walk more gently and slowly on this hard road that lies ahead, through every twist and turn of this week as you walk with Jesus and your brothers and sisters in Christ. It is my prayer that the love of God dwelling deep within your soul, would be wooing you and drawing you inexorably through every event; both beautiful and ugly,

terrifying and celebratory. And as you walk this road more contemplatively and deliberately, your heart may, at times, find itself breaking. And your heart will probably soar as well as your journey culminates with the resurrection; the resurrection of Jesus, and your own resurrection as well.

Now, let me turn our focus towards that long ago Palm Sunday. The day began with the crowd shouting out in jubilation as Jesus approached Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The people placed their cloaks and palm branches on the path in front of Jesus, shouting out, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!”

“Hosanna”. It means, “Save, I pray”. It is a plea for salvation, for freedom. The word evolved over time into a general shout of praise or adoration to God; praise be to God, because God is the one who saves and frees us from our many bondages; those physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, psychological, and social.

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” For centuries the people had been aching and yearning for the one who was promised to come, one who would free them from their pain and suffering and bondage. They were looking for their messiah, their savior. So, who was this “coming one”, and what kind of a kingdom would he usher in?

Well, unfortunately, the people had been looking for the wrong kind of a king, the wrong kind of savior. They were looking for someone who would end their suffering. They were looking for a warrior king who

would enter Jerusalem on a white stallion with a mighty army in tow, prepared to expel the Roman invaders. But instead of a General, Jesus came as a prince, “the prince of peace”. He entered the city, not riding a mighty steed, but on a donkey, with a small band of simple calloused smelly fishermen behind him. Not very impressive! Not at all what the people were expecting!

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” What does it mean for one to come in the name of the Lord? To understand, let me use the example of an ambassador of the United States. An ambassador is someone sent out in the name of the President, in the authority of the President, to represent the president, and to fulfill the president’s administrative agenda. Jesus came as an ambassador, in the name and authority of the Lord, to fulfill the Lord’s purpose.

But here’s the challenge. Sometimes the Lord’s purposes are antithetical to the people’s purpose; they run contrary to what the people may believe they desire and want. Here are examples in scripture of God’s antithetical ways: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” You see, the messiah who was to come would not be what many of the people expected.

The prophet Isaiah tried to prepare the Jews for this contrarian messiah. He spoke of this messiah: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Today’s epistle reading tells us further: “though [Christ Jesus]

was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross." Jesus, this coming king, was coming impressively in the very form of divinity. And yet, in the form of God, he came to be a slave, not a military general. He came in humility as one who would suffer and die. This was far from the king the people expected.

The Hebrew scriptures spoke clearly of the messiah's true purpose and mission, and yet, the Jewish people struggled to understand it. Many of them rejected Jesus mission. Jesus spoke of their rejection with this imagery: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Jesus would be – like a stone – rejected by many of the builders – many of the people – however, he would be the one unique stone upon which the whole building of God's kingdom would be built. Jesus was the ultimate example of one who comes in the name of the Lord. He came in great weakness as a humble obedient slave. He came peaceably, but not passively. He railed against the religious and political establishment. He came bringing love, not war. He came to wake people up, to open their eyes. He came as a disruptor. Jesus did not come to be aligned with power, but to identify himself with the marginalized and the poor.

Although many of the Jews misunderstood what God was trying to do in the world, Jesus followers down through the centuries DID grasp God's grand vision. You see, Jesus was not the only one who came in the name and authority of the Lord. God has sent many of Jesus' followers into the

world in the name of the Lord, to fulfill the Lord's purposes which may, at times, run antithetical to humanity's vision.

After Jesus, the apostle Paul was the most renowned of those who came in the name of the Lord, in God's antithetical way. Here is how Paul understood his calling. He wrote: "[The Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." In his great weakness, Paul was used by God to transform his world by the good news of God's loving grace.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus, as the messiah, was the ultimate one who came in the name of the Lord. But the apostle Paul was also one who came in the name of the Lord – as did Francis of Assisi, and Teresa of Avila, and Martin Luther King, and Margi Miller, and Bob Sawyer.

God is speaking to each and every one of us as well, calling us to go about our daily simple chores and activities and conversations in God's oftentimes antithetical mission and purpose. After all, life is short. And we don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make this journey with us. So, we must be swift to love. And make haste to be kind.

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."