

SERMON TITLE: “Journeying with Jesus to the Dark Places”

TEXT: Matthew 26:1-5; 47-56

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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DATE: April 5, 2009/Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday. This is typically a day of celebration, where we remember, celebrate, and enjoy Jesus’ triumphal entry as king into Jerusalem. Hosanna, we celebrate! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

As twenty-first century Canadians, we’re not really familiar with the arrivals of kings. The recent “coronation” of Barack Obama might be the closest thing we can think of. This was a global celebration—the media coverage, the euphoric language surrounding his assumption of the presidency, the impossible hopes that were/are placed upon him—all of these were on display for months leading up to his officially taking the position in January. It was a time of triumph and pageantry

Well, Jesus is a very different kind of king than any the world has ever seen. We see this in the manner of his entrance—on a donkey, of all things, as prophesied in the book of Zechariah—and in what he does once he enters Jerusalem. No elite dinners with political dignitaries, no elegant balls with exhaustive media coverage, no carefully choreographed news conferences.

Jesus’ ascent to the throne looks a little different. He drives all who are buying and selling out of the temple, reclaiming it as a house of prayer. He spends time teaching about the kingdom of God in the temple courts; he speaks against religious hypocrisy and warns about the destruction of the temple. This isn’t very good PR for an incoming king.

But the unique nature of Jesus’ kingship is nowhere more apparent than in what happens in the Garden of Gethsemane.

So, even though it is Palm Sunday, I’m not going to be speaking directly about Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. In fact, there is nothing very triumphant about our passages this morning. Today, we’re going to look at Jesus’ arrest which sets in motion the events that will lead to his “trial,” his crucifixion, and ultimately, his resurrection.

Jesus enters Jerusalem as a king—but a king who disorients, and reorients our conceptions of who God is and what he is doing in, through, and for his world.

First, let’s look at the beginning of Matthew 26:

1 When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 2 "As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. 5 "But not during the Festival," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."

At the outset of this chapter we see that even though Jesus' entry to Jerusalem was a joyous and hopeful time for some, behind the scenes there are forces at work that understand the threat he poses and who are working to get rid of him. There are some who have no interest in a new king—especially not a strange and unpredictable one like Jesus. And we see that Jesus knows what's coming.

Now, let's jump ahead to the end of the chapter, and Jesus' arrest:

47 While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." 49 Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.

50 Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. 51 With that, one of Jesus' companions [Peter, according to the Gospel of John] reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

52 "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

55 In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. 56 But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

All the disciples deserted him and fled.

One of my favourite Christmas carols is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." And my favourite line is this one: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." met in a tiny stable in a town just outside of Jerusalem.

The "hopes" part of the Christmas song we are familiar with, but what about the "fears?" What "fears" are met when God comes to be among us? How are they met? What role does fear play in the story we've heard read this morning, and the story of Easter in general? What can we learn about fear as we move into Holy Week, and Easter Sunday next week?

There is a certainly fear evident throughout the passages we just read. I wonder if fear is also part of our experience following Christ in a world that still knows of his absence as well as his presence.

Jesus did not make things easy for the nation of Israel—he was not what they expected in so many ways, and their response was, ultimately, one of violence, fear, and the desperate clinging to control.

Are we different? In a sense, of course, Jesus *does* “make things easier” for us; we are convinced that in him God is most fully revealed (Col. 1:19), that Christ is the turning point of God’s story, that we are saved and redeemed through the dark events of the coming week.

We also know more of the story than the first disciples did. We live on the other side of the empty tomb. We believe that God, in Christ, entered the darkness of the human condition and by rising from the dead *defeated* death. So we have an advantage over those first disciples.

But in another sense, Jesus doesn’t make things any easier for us than for the first disciples.

Like them, we await the coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness; like them, we find Jesus beautifully compelling and a little baffling; like them, we yearn for divine vindication, for a show of strength, for the final defeat of evil and death that we only catch glimpses of now.

Like them, we can’t really understand how God’s defeat of the darkness can possibly be accomplished through the events that we know will follow Palm Sunday.

And like them, we are sometimes afraid.

We’re afraid of the usual things: we’re afraid of what the future might hold for us and those we care about, we’re unsettled by the economic and political instability of so many areas of the planet, we’re anxious about the consequences of a culture that is consuming resources at an unsustainable rate, we’re worried about our kids, we’re afraid of getting sick, losing our jobs, of not being able to find jobs, of failing to meet the expectations of others, of letting those close to us down, of the rapid pace of change in modern society, about the erosion of familiar institutional structures, and on and on it goes.

And ultimately, of course, we’re afraid of death.

We’re afraid of all these things and more, to varying degrees, but I think we also might be, just a little bit, afraid of God. Let me explain what I mean by this.

On one level, the fear of the Lord is an appropriate and proper thing. The Bible speaks often of “the fear of the Lord.” Psalm 111 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning

of wisdom. God is God, and we are not; it is proper for us to revere him, to acknowledge our creaturely status before him, to recognize his right and his obligation to hold us to account.

But perhaps we're also afraid of God because he's unpredictable and we're never quite sure what to expect from him. He doesn't do our bidding, he doesn't automatically smooth our paths, as James reminded us last week in his discussion of Matthew 7 (ask, seek, knock); indeed, just a few chapters earlier, in Matthew 16:24, Jesus says that a life of discipleship will involve suffering, and dying to self! That sounds kind of frightening!

An important part of the Christian story—not the only part, but an important part—is that when God comes to his people, he comes in a way that provokes division, conflict, confusion, and fear.

We see all of these reactions in the events in and around Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, his arrest, and ultimately, his crucifixion.

We're so familiar with the story that we may, perhaps, be quite comfortable passing judgment upon those responsible for Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. We see them as somehow different from us. But at the root of all the violence and deceit and manipulation and grasping for control that we see in Jesus' final days is the **fear** we are all-too familiar with. We see:

- **Caiaphas**, who was afraid of losing the privilege bestowed upon him by Rome and of the collapse of the limited autonomy of his people

We see:

- The **Scribes and Pharisees**, who were haunted by the memory of their nation in exile, and who resolved that they, and everyone under their influence, would follow the law, down to the smallest letter, to avoid a repeat of God's judgment; their fear led them to establish a rigid and choking system of laws and regulations a system which neglected the spirit of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness

We see:

- The **disciples**, who were afraid of the way that the man they had given the last three years of their lives to was acting, and of the road he seemed determined to go down; we see that their conceptions of what a "Messiah" looked like could not fully accommodate what Jesus seemed determined to be, and do, and allow

We see

- **Peter** lashing out in violence in the garden when his fear got the better of him

We see:

- **Judas**, who was deathly afraid—as his later actions (returning the money, committing suicide) would demonstrate—of the implications of his betrayal of the hope of Israel

In the scene of Jesus' arrest, and all of the manipulation, religious hypocrisy, violence, and deceit that went into it, we see a snapshot into the *typical human*

response to the darkness of uncertainty, to the confusion and disorientation that happens when God doesn't come as we would like or expect him to.

What Jesus asks of us as post-Easter people is to move beyond the “typical human response.” He asks us to trust him, to walk with him even into the darkest most fearful places, because it is through his obedience to face the darkest of places that our redemption is won.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has told us that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven we must receive it as children. On the one hand, of course, children are afraid of many things—monsters under the bed, nasty dreams, bullies at school and a whole host of other things. But on the other hand, children are *not* afraid when they are with someone who they can trust, someone they are convinced is stronger than the things that frighten them.

When we were living in Vancouver, I would walk with the kids down Main Street at night to Claire's ballet class. It was about a fifteen-minute walk from our house and it was a journey that took place in the dark both ways. On one of these journeys, Claire said made one of those wonderfully optimistic declarations that kids love to make: even though she was scared to walk in the dark, *she wasn't scared when she walked with me.*

Claire was probably convinced that her dad was strong enough to protect her from whatever the darkness might hold, but I think that even she knew that dads can't *always* protect their kids from *everything*. She knew that bad things sometimes happen to kids. She knew that even grownups sometimes make mistakes and get afraid.

I think that her lack of fear was also due to the simple fact that she knew that *her dad had walked in the dark before*, that it wasn't his first time, and that he had at least some idea what to expect.

I think that her comfort was due, at least in part, to the fact that she trusted her dad, and that she knew her dad had faced the darkness before her.

The same is true for us as we walk with God. We can walk into the darkness with God *because we know he has faced it before us*. After all, there are few darker weeks than the one Jesus is about to walk into after Palm Sunday

But we don't just trust Jesus because we know he understands and has faced the darkness; this is important, but it's not enough. We are confident to journey with Jesus because he has *defeated* the darkness. Jesus does not *leave* us in the darkness, but promises to lead us *out* of it.

Of course, we only get glimpses of this defeat right now. One day, Christ's defeat of evil will be final and obvious to all. But right now we live in the in-between time where fear will be part of our experience.

And in this in-between time, I think all of us can see glimpses of ourselves in this morning's passage: Like Caiaphas, we cling to our privilege, security, and stability; like Peter, we sometimes lash out in anger; like the Scribes and Pharisees, we rely on our religiosity; like the disciples, we sometimes just run away from our problems, we turtle and refuse to face them; like Judas, we betray our Lord. Any one of these responses to fear might characterize us at various points in our lives.

But our response to God—be it on the individual or corporate level—does not *have* to be characterized by fear, and the desperate seizing of what little control we can obtain. Like the disciples after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, we can determine to walk with God, even when God comes to us in strange and unexpected ways, even when he challenges our understanding of who he is, and even when he asks us to trust him with and through our fears.

We can do all of this because the events of Easter convince us that we follow a God who really has conquered the darkest elements of our world and of ourselves, and that this God will one day usher in a future free from fear.

So what might this future look like?

I'm a huge U2 fan. This week I received a wonderful surprise—a friend from Vancouver managed to get tickets to see U2 in Vancouver in October.

I've been listening to their latest CD for the last couple of weeks and there is one line that I think conveys wonderfully the reality of what is accomplished by the cross and the resurrection we will celebrate next week:

The sweetest melody is the one we haven't heard.

There is a sense in which this statement doesn't make sense—how can a tune we haven't even heard be the “sweetest one?” But this is, in fact, the heart of the Christian hope that emerges out of the darkness and fear of Holy Week. The best is yet to come.

The coming week is the most significant week in the Christian calendar. It is the week where God himself entered and defeated the darkness, the violence, the confusion, the hypocrisy, the desire for religious control and management, and the fear that we see in Jesus' arrival as king and ultimate arrest, and that are such prevalent and tragic components of human existence.

And he entered our darkness so that joy, not fear, would have the last word; so that the world could begin to hear echoes of the melody we haven't yet fully heard.

I close with a quote from Frederick Buechner:

God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy, because

whatever else it means to say that God created us in his image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in him [like the disciples, who fled in Jesus' darkest hour], even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted by him [like Peter, after denying his Lord three times], his mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood.

Because of Easter, we have God's joy "in our blood." As we enter this week, as we ponder the arrival of our strange and glorious king, as we take time (Maundy Thursday) to dwell on the darkness of Jesus' final days, let us determine not to flee from the darkness and confusion in fear, as the disciples did, or to rely on the security provided by religious systems as the Scribes and Pharisees did, but to cling to Christ, to journey with him into the heart of our fear and brokenness and uncertainty.

Let us transcend our fears—of God, of each other, of a world where God's kingdom has not fully come.

And let us be bearers of light and life in a world which knows much of darkness but in which the light of Easter continues to dawn.

Thanks be to God.