

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 21:1-11

INTRO

Thank you for clicking in once again today to this message — today is a special day in the church year — Palm Sunday & the beginning of Holy Week, also known as “Bipolar Day” in the church. It’s a day in which Jesus is welcomed in to Jerusalem, hailed as the Messianic King, & yet at the same time, it is also the beginning of the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and will end in incomprehensible bloodshed, torture, & pain. So, there’s very different emotions swirling around on this day, & it’s strangely a sobering day, because we know that today’s cries of “Hosanna” will soon turn to cries of “Crucify him!”

Once again, as we begin our time together, I’ll invite you to pause this recording & to read the lessons for today, but I’d suggest switching the order a little & begin with the Psalm, Psalm 31:9-16. It begins, “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress.” Many people throughout the world today, will identify with this prayer & the feeling of being in distress & crying out for help. So I would suggest starting here, with this Psalm — this cry of need — and as you pray this prayer, ask yourself, “What is my cry for need today? In what way do I feel that things are falling apart around me? How am I in need of God’s intervention?”

Then, I’ll suggest moving to the OT lesson, Isaiah 50:4-9a (“9a” means simply the first half of verse 9). This passage is great too, and as we read it, it helps to be reminded that when the Reformers read the OT, they saw hints & shadows of Jesus everywhere — with the knowledge of the death & resurrection of Jesus, the OT pops like never before. And here, in Isaiah 50, when you read this passage, you can hear the allusion to Jesus — it’s like Jesus himself is saying these words as he enters Jerusalem & Holy Week. It starts in verse 4:

“The Lord God has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.” —Isaiah 50:4

So in light of Psalm 31 & our cry of despair, Jesus responds with the promise that his word will sustain the weary. He then describes all of the abuse that he goes through, and yet he says,

“therefore I have set my face like a flint” —Isaiah 50:7

He’s determined to see this through even to the bitter end. So there’s some foreshadowing of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for you and me right here in our OT lesson — that’s the word — the good news that encourages us in our despair.

Once you’ve read these two passages, then I’ll ask you to shift to our NT lesson, Philippians 2:5-11, in which Paul describes the downward trajectory that Jesus took, lowering himself sacrificially — something that we see exemplified for us in our Gospel lesson today, Matthew 21:1-11 — the story of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. So take a few moments to hit pause, read those texts, & then come back to the rest of this recording.

A CHANGE OF PLANS

Robbie Burns wrote in one of his poems, “The best-laid plans of mice and men go oft awry”, and this last month has certainly been a reminder to us that our best plans are certainly not guarantees — that the course of our day-to-day lives are ultimately out of our control. Life throws curve balls at us, and when you’re not used to them they can be difficult to adjust to.

The Christian author Kathleen Norris writes about the unexpected developments in the journeys of our lives saying,

“The hard truth about journeys is that they demand that we embrace the unknown. We may embark with high hopes — accepting a marriage proposal, receiving news of a long-desired pregnancy — or with dread — the diagnosis of an inoperable and metastasized cancer — but we actually know very little about what will be demanded of us along the way, let alone what the outcome will be. Even the most humdrum day is a journey in this sense; upon rising in the morning we utter our prayers inattentively, as a demanding to-do list looms in our minds, but we can’t foresee what we’ll accomplish during the next twenty-four hours. We don’t even know if this day, and those halfhearted prayers, will be our last.” —Kathleen Norris, *God For Us*, 151.

The season of Lent is a spiritual journey that we embark on every year, as we walk with Jesus towards the cross & his death. And this Lent has certainly been a journey of the unexpected.

I was reminded this week of the passage from the book of James:

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’ — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” —James 4:13-17

Nothing is guaranteed us. People who have been planning their spring weddings are scrambling to Plan B. People who have lost loved ones aren’t able to hold public funerals, aren’t able to grieve & get closure. Some fathers aren’t able to see the births of their children. Some people aren’t able to be with their failing parents. All of our plans have been changed, & if you want proof, just check all of the Youtube videos up now about how to cut your own hair from home — those weren’t up there before! All of our plans have changed — and after the dust settles & all of this is done, things will not be put together just the way they were before.

Thankfully, God is the God of Plan B’s. He is the God who hears our cries for help — cries like we read in Psalm 31 — and who responds to them. Plan B is where God sets up his office. And this is key: often appearances aren’t in fact the reality. Things may appear to be going one way, but the reality is that something else is happening entirely.

PLAN B & THE CHURCH WITHOUT BUILDINGS

Let me give you an example of this truth — that appearances are not always the reality. We are stepping into Holy Week. Thursday is Maundy Thursday, in which Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples — the Last Supper. Friday is Good Friday, the day in which Jesus was nailed to a cross &

died. And Next Sunday is Easter — the glorious & unexpected day of resurrection, the source of all our hope — without it we as Christians have nothing.

No pastor in the world would have hoped to be conducting online or recorded messages for Holy Week and Easter Sunday — none. This is Plan B for pastors, and it doesn't even look like a good Plan B! What is God doing?

Last week I picked up an old church magazine that I've had laying around the house for a number of years, but had never gotten around to read. I picked it up, & because like many of you I have more time on my hands, I read it. The magazine is from the year 2016 — 4 years ago, but listen to what one writer said in one article about the nature of the church:

“It would be good for us to remember this—that within all a church's signs and sacraments, within what is preached and what is taken in communion, the focus of our collective worship is Christ, who is forever evading our grasp on his life. Much as we may long to control the future of the Church, or bolster her theology, her guiding Spirit is ‘like the wind’—and who is to say where it will go? Who is to say the Church won't go into hiding, relegated to B-team basement meetings and recovery clinics and rest home hospitality rooms? Who is to say that she won't, like Jesus himself, fizzle out into [disgrace]?”

...If all the means for preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments are destroyed; if there are no priests or congregants or even churches; if every Bible is confiscated; Christ will remain. His message of grace to sinners—the message for which all the Church's sacraments work and which all her doctrines uphold—is the wind that will continue blowing across the face of the earth. Even invisibly. This is the unfettered everydayness of God. The power of the Church, after all, is the power of Christ—a power that to all the world looks like weakness.” —Ethan Richardson, “Church of the Deconstruction”, *The Mockingbird*, vol. 7, Spring 2016, 36-37.

Four years ago! Talking about the possibility that one day there might be no church, and yet that that doesn't mean that there is no Jesus, or that his Gospel ceases to exist.

Maybe, maybe the outward appearance isn't the reality — that even though we can't get together physically as a body, that that doesn't mean that the church ceases to exist. Maybe God is doing something through his church in this time, in this challenge. Maybe through this he's going to teach us new ways of being the church & of living into our identity as his body.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

As Jesus enters Jerusalem the crowds greet him shouting, "Hosanna!" aN(heuyv3wh — The word *Hosanna* is Hebrew, meaning "O save us!" — a word that had morphed into a term of praise. The people were welcoming the "Son of David" (vs. 9) — the Messiah into the royal city to take his place on the throne, kick out the Romans, & re-establish an independent & free Jewish nation. They were thinking that he had come to slay the dragon. The outward appearances showed an earthly king arriving home. But appearances aren't always the reality.

Jesus was a king, yes, and he was coming to Jerusalem to establish his kingdom, but he did it in humility, riding in on a donkey and then descending right into the Garden of Gethsemane & to the cross. Deliverance is coming, but it's not going to look like what we thought.

Many of us are still scrambling & adjusting to our Plan B's. We like to put off the appearance that we've got it together, that we're strong & in control, but the reality is that we're weak, we're not in control, & we get scared when we face uncertainties. But we're not alone here — Jesus walked this road for the very purpose of saving us out of the shipwreck of our lives — when everything goes sideways, and the effects of our sinfulness come crashing over us like incessant waves, pummeling us & threatening to drown us.

And though we've shifted in much of our lives to our Plan B's, the cross was always God's Plan A. Jesus took it up out of love for you and me, and he is in control despite all appearances to the contrary. The appearance is not the reality, & the King of Glory meets us not in our appearances, but in our realities, & he says to us, "Your sins are forgiven" — so that we can rest in what he's accomplished for us. Amen.