



Sermon for Palm Sunday and Holy Week, March 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Mark 11:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Phil. 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

Here we are, crossing over that threshold on this day that marks the beginning of our movement into the heart of the Christian story – the entry of Jesus Christ into the life of the city and the place of religious and political power, to face refusal, betrayal, denial, and death head on, to give himself completely to those he loved and to the whole world, to be crucified and die, and then to rise again to life.

Today is a day in the life of the human city, where humanity regularly acts out its parades and plays that reveal just what we are as humans and just what all of our systems amount to. *And what are we?* We are a people eager to do the right thing, but easily tugged this way and that by all the things that grab our fickle nature, and easily over-zealous for our own self-protection and self-righteousness and security – a people driven so easily by passions and impulses and the winds of the world around us.

Jesus enters the city – and he is raised up by those in the city, and he is cast down and driven out and murdered by those in the city.

As it was then, so it is now. Jerusalem today is a city in pain, a city torn by strife. So is Rafah, now threatened by Jerusalem. So is Kiev. So is Moscow. So is Beijing. So is Washington DC.

And so is this city of Coeur d'Alene, and our neighboring city of Post Falls. This last week, after the mayor's "State of the City" address, I spoke with both the mayor and the head of the Chamber of Commerce. They expressed sadness and pain over the ugliness and mean-spiritedness among people in the wider community. This last week, when I brought together pastors from nine other churches to listen to and speak with the president and leading faculty and staff of NIC, we heard of twisted ways being used to create chaos, stir anxiety, and threaten ruin to a space for learners.

We have deep, ugly potentials for destruction in our humanity. And we see those potentials arising today with new force and venom.

Such is the city that Jesus enters and encounters, head on. And we are ready to hail him as king and lord and deliverer, because we are so desperate for a solution to the situations that we find ourselves in and that we create. But then, he disappoints us. He does not step up into power and take over the mess and purge the halls of power. Jesus is disappointing to us and to our expectations. And then, in response to the whisperers and agitators, we begin to turn. Maybe we join the mob in shouting "Crucify him." Maybe we join the followers in hiding and running and denying that we have anything to do with him. Maybe we join the political rulers and leaders in mocking him and everyone else as we

seek to keep the status quo. Maybe we join other followers in looking on from a safe distance or in doing just little things that we think we can do, gripped by our own sense of powerlessness. Maybe we join frustrated followers in betraying him for a bit of profit for ourselves.

Because Jesus disappoints us. Sure, we are amazed by Jesus, his teachings, his healing power, and his way with people. Sure, we see how Jesus is a master of connecting and building networks with people – he has connections in the city that are ready for his arrival, and he can guide his team to find where someone has a colt ready for him to ride and a room for them to meet for the Passover meal. He seems to have so much promise. But Jesus also frustrates us. We join with others in hailing his entry into the city – on a colt (or donkey in other Gospel accounts), not a warhorse – making noise and paving his way. We are ready for him to step in to fulfill our deep desires for someone with muscle and power to take over and return things to glory days. “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David” – “Here come the Good Old Days” – we with the people hailing Jesus are wanting a powerful king, a warrior prince like David was, someone who will return this city and nation to its prior glory or imagined prior glory.

This is not the path that Jesus chooses or seeks. Here, as the Gospel of Mark tells us, Jesus arrived in the center of Jerusalem, at the Temple, and then... did nothing. Jesus looked around at everything... and then left for the night without doing anything.

What? This is not like the Jesus we see in the rest of the Gospel of Mark where everything that Jesus does and everything that happens around Jesus is happening immediately. Here, Jesus pauses and lets silence and emptiness fill the space of everyone’s expectations.

The action will come, soon enough. Jesus will turn over the tables and drive out the merchants and money-changers from the Temple. Jesus will confront head-on the hypocrisy and twisted teachings of religious leaders. Jesus will speak of a kingdom that is different than the world of the empire.

And so, religious leaders looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. By stealth. Like happens with cross burnings in yards. Like the pipe bomb here that was left to take the life of Fr. Bill Wassmuth at St. Pius back in the 1980s. Like what happened to one of my seminary students, an ordained Black woman priest, who told the story of being taken by two wayward police officers and driven out of the city of Milwaukee to a back country road where she was threatened with beating and death. Like the seizure and killing of Matthew Shephard, a young gay man taken by angry men to the country and tied to a ranch fence and pistol whipped. Like church burnings and synagogue burnings and mosque burnings. Like religious leaders even in this community here, who agitate their people and conspire among themselves for political power.

And in the midst of all of this, Jesus stays steadily forward. He shares meals with followers, friends, and interested people. He gathers with his closest followers for the holy Passover meal. He speaks truth that one gathered here will betray him. He gives himself to them, saying “This is my body. This is my blood.” Again, he speaks truth about our all-too-feeble humanity and still offers a promise to us: “I am giving myself to you. And you will all desert me. And when I rise, I will go before you into Galilee and regather you and welcome you.” And then, he moves forward – to the place where he already anticipates being betrayed and captured in the night.

Jesus emptied himself. Humbled himself. Even death on a cross.

This is Jesus. Choosing a path that was not what most of our rulers today would choose, to enter even into the jaws of death itself, given out by the very people he came to love and serve and bring into God's embrace. And, it is a choice. It is a path freely and purposefully chosen.

Tucked away in between our readings today from Matthew's Gospel, between the cries of "Hosanna" and the cries of "Crucify him," is this amazing, powerful, poetic passage about Jesus from Paul's letter to the Philippians. This passage captures the whole intentional movement of Jesus through Holy Week – and not only through Holy Week, but through his whole life as God-with-us, God in human flesh and blood – and even beyond this, as the very core of who God is. In Jesus Christ, we find the God who willingly becomes empty, pours everything out.

This is Jesus. This! Know him. See him. Hear him. Emptying himself. Humbling himself. Not just passively. Not just giving in to the forces around him. But facing willingly forward along a path that was leading into the threat of betrayal, injustice, denial by friends, cruelty by people in power, denial of responsibility by the powerful, savageness, suffering, and death. Willingly. Intentionally. Emptying himself for all whom he encountered.

Even for those religious leaders and minions who generated false testimony, fake news, "alternate facts" and insinuations, motivated only to find any means to justify ending him. Even for followers who fell asleep, denied knowing him, kept to the shadows. Even for the goon squad of soldiers who abused and mocked him. Even for Barrabas, and the people who chose Barrabas instead of him.

From the beginning of time, and now at the lowest point as he hangs naked on the cross on the killing hill, gasping for breath.

At our worst, we are truly awful.

Jesus gave a loud cry – AAAAUUUUGHH! – and took his last breath and died.

This self-emptying and humbling was not an easy path. It meant treading the gauntlet of human conniving and cruelty. But it is the path that is the very heart of God, and the path that God chooses again, and again, and again. The tender love of God for this human race, this love that suffers willingly and purposefully, goes to any length to save us.

The path of redemption of our humanity is not around human conniving and cruelty. The path is not over it, or under it. The path is not running from it the other direction. The path of redemption of our humanity is facing straight into it – straight into the worst of our nature – armed only with the love of God. This is the love that triumphs.

Choose this day whom you will follow and serve. Is it this King, who does not come as a warrior-god or a power-grabber, but who comes as a servant and lover of all? Or is it one of the many rulers in this world who open the ways of darkness in their eagerness for power and control?

We get seduced by our own righteous indignation and our angry eagerness for things to be set finally right as we see them. As it was for Jewish zealots during these days of the Roman Empire, so it is for too many Christians today, and for far too many Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, seeking a warrior Messiah and ready to fight in the name of and on behalf of their imagined Messiah warrior-god with violence and aggression and guerrilla tactics. But scripture does not call for the followers of Jesus to rise up and fight. Ultimate justice and victory come not from us, but from God.

This journey with Jesus in his self-emptying becomes a time of emptying ourselves – more and more through all our days. It is not a path we have sought. But it is a path we choose to follow, for the sake of others and not just for ourselves. Please, friends, let this Holy Week open up a clearer vision of what it means to empty ourselves for the sake of others. Whether that calls for radical action, or radical quieting. Whatever surprising turn it takes. However we take up the moments of choice we are given, to give ourselves away for the sake of others, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, help those coming out of prison to find freedom, bring sight to those who are blinded.

When all the machinery of the world seems stacked against those we love and seek to follow and serve, there are moments of defiant, purposeful self-giving that we can take up. Today, following the death of Jesus, we hear of Joseph of Arimathea – one spark of kinder humanity, even at the very end. And we hear of the women waiting to attend to the body of their beloved friend and guide – another spark of kinder humanity. And a Roman centurion and those with him – a spark of a truthful humanity that is, in the end, able to see. Any of these who put themselves at risk for what they did or said. Joseph gave of himself. He emptied something of himself. For the one he found himself calling Master, Teacher, Savior, Friend, Lord. Because he was stirred by love, and sorrow, and hope for that love to continue and to be remembered with reverence.

Go, friends, meditate and think deeply on these things.

To follow Jesus is to learn to choose this path. And, to fail, and, to falter. And, to begin again, because we find Jesus reaching to us to forgive and heal and set on our feet again, saying once again, “Come, follow me.”

On this day, this is what I want you to hear – that Christ Jesus came into the world, and entered THIS CITY, with purpose and resolve – that Christ Jesus rode into the sea of fickle human passion – that Christ Jesus came into the world to save all of us. ALL of us. And that Christ Jesus, God the Eternal Word, made a choice from all eternity to give up everything for our sake.

At the heart of Christ is immense courage to choose such a path – and to follow that path with such calm, such submission – willful submission!

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Let this same mind be in you, that was in Christ Jesus.