Sermon for Palm Sunday
April 13, 2025

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene
The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Following a time of silent meditation]

What shall we say?

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, into the place of religious and political power, and into the heart of humanity, 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. Jesus steps forward into the fray of humanity, first with his followers and companions, and then without them as they flee, deny, and find themselves frozen by fear.

We have made this journey together, friends. From palms to thorns. From "Hosanna" to "Crucify." From praise to mockery. All for the One who is God-with-us, Emmanuel, this True Human in full union with the God of Life, the Self-Giving One.

What more is there to say?

Yet, we know there is more to see. There is more to say. Because there is the power of this God whose self-giving is so great that it passes through the stillness of the grave and the life-sucking vacuum of hell, giving light and life all along the way, crumbling the walls of emptiness, and rising in full and new life, bringing along in the sweep of this self-giving energy all who have perished and been bound. Because there is no place where God will not go to give the gift of life, of love that conquers all.

Easter awaits. We are on the journey now this week, following Christ Jesus, God in the flesh, the fully human one, on this path he chose to face and follow. We are on the journey following the self-giving, self-emptying God of the universe – whose complete self-giving nature is the very reason you exist and have your life. We are on the journey following the God who will not abandon us to sin, death, the grave, and any separation.

We may choose such paths. Or, we may find ourselves giving in to such choices. But God does not abandon us – and God does not act like us. And Christ Jesus, the True Human, does not act like us.

How is it we act?

We act with a deep self-interest that is often rooted in fear of rejection and being made an outcast. We act with a creeping arrogance that seeps into our thinking, that we are right simply because of our own experience and our own patterns of thought that feel right to us. We act out of denial of our fragility and mortality, our fallibility and limitedness, and faultiness and capacity to hurt others and ourselves. All in subtle ways that can at times magnify and become not so subtle at all.

Three things – how groups with power act, how people in leadership and power act, and how people under attack act.

There is an important concept that has been part of the great insights into human nature, from social psychology and sociology. It's the concept of "groupthink." We enacted some of the scripts of groupthink this morning as we processed with palms but then rose up calling for death.

There are important ways that being part of a group can help safeguard against our own individual errors and fantasies. Being part of a group can help us grow, think and feel in new ways that expand us, help us see ourselves and the world more clearly. Groups can be important correctives to the ways we can wander dangerously when we try to go it alone. That is why we gather in fellowship as followers of Christ – because we realize that we need each other.

But there are also dangers to being in groups – especially in groups that fall too much in love with themselves and begin to think of others outside themselves as weaker, dumber, more deceived and twisted. "Groupthink" is what happens when conformity becomes the primary motivation and blocks out the ability to question or disagree.

Here is a good definition from Psychology Today. "Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when a group of well-intentioned people makes irrational or non-optimal decisions spurred by the urge to conform or the belief that dissent is impossible. The problematic or premature consensus that is characteristic of groupthink may be fueled by a particular agenda—or it may be due to group members valuing harmony and coherence above critical thought." (Psychology Today)

Going further, the site explains that "In the interest of making a decision that furthers their group cause, members may also ignore ethical or moral consequences. While it is often invoked at the level of geopolitics or within business organizations, groupthink can also refer to subtler processes of social or ideological conformity, such as participating in bullying or rationalizing a poor decision being made by one's friends."

We see groupthink take over when these ways of thinking and acting become the pattern

- Over-attachment to one's group identity and an ideal of cohesion
- Discouragement and punishment of dissent by authorities or organizational culture
- A rush to making a decision
- Desire to feel good about selves and group

Groupthink will come out when there is

- High stress
- Threats (perceived or real) to group identity

In groupthink, people succumb to taking up one idea, one goal, setting aside all inner voices that warn against how this cause may be unethical or immoral, how this choice could cause ripples of collateral damage and destruction, even death. Here are the core undercurrent commands of group-thinking:

Conform
Be like
Swallow doubt and disagreement, silence that little voice of conscience
Belittle, insult, or condemn any who disagree
Dig heels into the ground of moral superiority and invincibility
Rationalize decision, not matter what counter-evidence

Leaders face their own pitfalls and slips of commitment to truth. Leaders are enticed by the lure of power, authority, control, and being liked or adored (or feared). Leaders also get sucked in by the rush for decisions. So, leaders slip into routine problems:

- Cognitive biases like "the illusion of truth" (believing something is true simply because it has been repeated)
- Delusional self-confidence, to the point that it becomes impossible to apologize or acknowledge being wrong
- The need for and attachment to admiration, along with overall arrogance, which sets up a culture of "yes people" that give the leader what the leader wants

So, those are ways that groups and leaders alike can slide into cruelty and loss of moral rootedness. Now, what about those who are under attack, who are bearing the brunt of bad decisions of leaders and groups in power? Under attack, we tend to have four classic responses: Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. You know what fawning is, right? Like rolling over like a submissive dog, or acting adoring of the powerful so as to appease them. We saw each of these responses by characters in the reading of Christ's Passion. The disciples brought swords and started to put up a fight, until Jesus stopped them. They then fled, ran, or kept in the shadows. Peter's denial may be a way of freezing, an in-the-moment terror response of denial and deflection. The Judean leaders practiced fawning with Pilate, usually an enemy, in order to get their way.

So, this is the human city. This is the human condition.

But hear 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.
Let this same mind be in you.

Followers of Jesus, this is our path. It flies in the face of all else around us in our self-absorbed society and world filled with self-righteous indignation. But it is the path of grace and of true, true love.

Oh, God, grant us the courage to move forward with your Son, through this week and through the rest of our lives, that this path of grace may be opened wider and wider, in more and more places.