

“BUCKLE UP!”
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Palm/Passion Sunday

Part I – Palm Sunday
Matthew 21: 1-11

During this long stretch of time that we have been confined to our homes and socially distant from each other, most of us have been given a plethora of ideas on what to do online to keep ourselves occupied. You can go on virtual tours of famous museums around the world. You can watch zoo animals frolicking in their enclosures. You can have work meetings or family gatherings on Zoom, or you can actually take virtual rides at amusement parks all over the world.

Well, one day, in a fit of boredom, I guess, I decided I would take a virtual ride at Disney World, on a ride, by the way, that I wouldn't in a million years, actually go on in person – Space Mountain. I have to say it was a pretty interesting experience.

If you've ever been on a roller coaster, you know the routine. You get in your seats and "buckle up," but good! You get strapped in, or pull the harness over, or whatever – you just want to be in good and tight! And then, you take off, and whoosh! It's on. Sometimes thrilling and sometimes terrifying.

Well, friends, no two phrases could better capture the two ends of Holy Week, the week we're beginning today - sometimes thrilling, sometimes terrifying.

Here we stand on Sunday, the beginning of the week, the day on which Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Before we get to the events of today, let us go back a little, like going back to the start of a roller coaster picking up steam.

In the years leading up to this, the three years of Jesus' public ministry, so many good things had happened. People came to know him, they heard his teaching, they experienced healing, they learned about service and sacrifice, they saw what true love looks like and acts like. They flocked to Jesus in droves because they knew he was like no other. He was changing lives, and they wanted to watch it, be part of it, be changed themselves.

Yet interwoven in those years was an undercurrent of discontent, mostly by those in charge, by religious leaders, even. Jesus was saying and doing things so foreign to them, so threatening to them, that before long, they were out to get him, and tried to discredit him, trap him at every turn. It didn't take long for things to turn ugly and to know that they would stop at nothing to stop him.

The time is coming when they will do their worst, but before that, on this day that we remember today, Palm Sunday, it's all about adoration. Jesus comes into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey (as it was foretold in the Old Testament). He comes, not like a trampling warrior, on a horse with armor and weapons, but peacefully, on a donkey with little else. In every way, he shows that that his might is different from worldly might, his strength comes not from weapons of destruction but from his Father God, his power is not shown in anger and domination, his power pours forth in love.

When he enters Jerusalem, he is greeted with adoration, with people lining the city streets, waving palm branches, spreading their cloaks on the streets before him, and shouting "Hosanna!"

How wonderful it is that Jesus had these moments! How wonderful that he saw the love and care that people had for him, that he knew they saw him as Lord, when they cried “Hosanna!” which means “save us.” They knew he was the One that could save them.

After all of the horrors of people threatening him, questioning him, conspiring against him, how wonderful it is that on this day Jesus experienced happiness, contentment and joy, that he felt the love that people had for him.

Let us remember these joyous moments in Jesus’ life as Steve Gilmore takes us there in song. As you listen, I invite you to lift to the Lord your words of praise and adoration, just as those people did on the streets of Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday so long ago.

Part II – Passion Sunday
Matthew 26:14-74

At the beginning of a roller coaster ride, it usually starts pretty slowly making a gradual climb up, up and up to a really high peak before cresting and then, in an instant, going over the top, and flying down a track at record speed. It takes your breath away with its intensity, it literally feels like the bottom is dropping out.

Well, that's where we find ourselves in Holy Week. The bottom seemed to drop out after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. With each passing day, things got worse and worse.

Jesus goes into the temple and overturns the moneychangers' tables, which angered the already angry rulers even more. No matter what he did that week, people were out to get him. He got in as much teaching as he could, but at every turn he was challenged. Everyone could see that his time was running short.

Jesus knew it too, and he knew, sadly, that some closest to him would be a part of his ending. We heard in the long lesson that Mike read about his final meal

with those closest to him, his disciples. In those hours Jesus taught them, he ate a meal with them, he acted as a slave to them by washing their feet – he did all those things and so much more. But, what should have been a precious time among friends included the reality that one of these his brothers would betray him, one would deny him, and nearly all of them would fail to be there when he needed them the most – at the cross.

Indeed, one of them, Judas, was conspiring against him. We don't know why, but it has been speculated that Judas might have grown tired of waiting for Jesus to be the kind of powerful leader and ruler he expected him to be.

Another of them, one very dear to Jesus, Peter, when his back was up against the wall, when he was in the courtyard after Jesus was arrested, denied even knowing him – not once, not twice, but three times.

Not so long ago, mere days ago, on Palm Sunday, Jesus heart overflowed with joy. Now, on Thursday night, his heart must have been breaking. And then, came more – trials, beatings, scourging, mocking, the torturous journey to Golgotha

carrying the cross on which he would die, and then those awful hours hanging on the cross between two criminals.

How quickly things changed that week from joy to sorrow, from being adored to being hated, abandoned, crucified.

We know a little bit about things changing quickly in life, don't we? Not so long ago, life was normal, run of the mill, if you will. Today, not so. We're surrounded on all sides by fear. Where not so long ago, we gathered at school, work, with friends, now, we're separated, socially distant from one another. Where every week, not so long ago, we would come into this room and hug each other, and hold hands as we sang "Bind Us Together," now we can't, and we long to.

This change has come on us so rapidly, that it's bewildering. It is indeed, like riding on a roller coaster, it's taken our breath away and we're not sure what's around the next turn.

Friends, we would do well to follow Jesus' example, as we go through these troubling times. For as he took these final steps in this Holy Week, Jesus did some things that would serve us well to emulate.

For one, Jesus offered his innermost thoughts to God. There was nothing he was feeling that he tried to hide from God. When he was happy, he thanked God and praised him. When he was troubled, he offered his troubles to God in prayer. Think on those moments in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed that the cup of suffering might pass from him, but if not, that God's will would be done. Or think of those moments when he hung on the cross, when he spoke words of forsakenness and thirst. There was not a thing Jesus was going through that he could not share with his Father.

May it be the same with us. All of us are experiencing deep emotions right now. And the emotions are all over the place – fear, anxiety, fatigue, concern – you name it. Give it to God. Like Jesus, open up your heart and pour out your feelings to God. Give them to God, that he might calm you, strengthen you and give you courage for the days ahead.

Secondly, Jesus trusted that God would see this through – what is the “this”? The work God had sent him to do. God would make a way for it to come to completion, even if Jesus couldn’t see how at times.

And God will make a way for us through this pandemic as well, even if we can’t see how at times. He will cause things to happen, he will move mountains, he will make a way – and one day, this horror will come to an end. We can count on that.

Finally, Jesus knew that God was with him every step of the journey. Every step of it. God was there for the parade in Jerusalem, he was present at that table with the disciples, he was there at Golgotha. He was there, Jesus was never apart from his Father.

And friends, neither are we. May we rest in that knowledge, and know that when we’re afraid we can’t carry on, he will carry us. We’ve all heard that wonderful story about footprints, right?

It goes like this:

One night I dreamed a dream.

As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,

One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,

I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,

especially at the very lowest and saddest times,

there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,

You'd walk with me all the way.

But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,

there was only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you

Never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you."

Indeed, friends, when Jesus went through the worst life could offer, God carried him, and now, when life is hard for all of us, he carries us as well. As we journey with Jesus through this holiest of weeks, may we do as he did, share all our thoughts and fears with God, trust that he will make a way, and know that he will carry us through this just as surely as he carried Jesus into the clouds of heaven. May it be so.

Amen.