



Isn't Love Enough?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

Palm Sunday ~ April 14, 2019

Zechariah 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

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| 1 Give thanks to the God who is good; *
God's mercy endures for ever. | 24 On this day the Holy One has acted; *
we will rejoice and be glad in it. |
| 2 Let Israel now proclaim, *
"God's mercy endures for ever." | 25 Hosannah, God, hosannah! *
O Holy One, send us now success. |
| 19 Open for me the gates of righteousness; *
I will enter them; I will offer thanks to God. | 26 Blest is the one who comes in the name of the God; *
we bless you from the house of God. |
| 20 "This is the gate of the Holy One; *
those who are righteous may enter." | 27 God is the Holy One; who shined upon us; *
form a procession with branches
up to the horns of the altar. |
| 21 I will give thanks to you, for you answered me *
and have become my salvation. | 28 "You are my God, and I will thank you; *
you are my God, and I will exalt you." |
| 22 The same stone which the builders rejected *
has become the chief cornerstone. | 29 Give thanks to God who is good; *
God's mercy endures for ever. |
| 23 This is God's doing, *
and it is marvelous in our eyes. | |

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Luke 19:28-40

Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

There is an old story that the explorer Marco Polo was taken to the court of Genghis Khan—some of you may know him from your history books and some from Disney’s movie *Mulan*. Suffice to say he was the opposite of a warm and fuzzy guy. Trying desperately to come up with something to talk about, Marco Polo began to tell Khan the story of Jesus. Khan listened attentively, loving it—and then he got to the events of Holy Week and Khan became more and more agitated. After Polo read the part about Jesus breathing his last, Kahn thundered “Well what did this Christian God do then? He must have sent legions to destroy, wipe out those who did this to his Son.” Khan was quite disappointed in the answer and did not convert to Christianity.

Khan clearly got what we often miss—how truly shocking Jesus’ story actually is. Many of us know it like the back of our hand. Of course, God didn’t send an army. The story ends like this: Jesus died but after 3 days rose to show all who believed they would not perish but have eternal life. Right?

Today, we are asked to hear this story again for the first time. To forget all we know and follow Jesus as the crowd goes from loving him to screaming for his blood in no time flat. Follow him to his miserable death as if we have never heard it before. It is our final Lenten discipline and it is probably the hardest Lenten discipline. It is hard work to make ourselves slow down, stop and take notice rather than mentally rush to the end of the story and the empty tomb.

The Gospel story we are about to hear is a catalogue of grief and abject failure. It begins well enough with a meal, though that takes an odd turn when Jesus starts to talk about the bread and wine as his body and blood. Then they go to Gethsemane—where Jesus prays for the cup to pass from him. The disciples seem a little confused by all of this, but confident that their leader, though he seems uncharacteristically shaken, will be OK in the end. So despite his call to them, his plea for them to stay awake with him, they yawn and drift off. They awake to soldiers and torches and the action speeds up from there. Judas’ lethal kiss. Peter’s 3 fold denial, the disciples fleeing for their lives without so much as a backwards glance, the court’s conviction and the crowd choosing Barabbas.

And before we know it Jesus has been flogged within an inch of his life and is hanging on a cross, the life draining out of him. Through all of this he refused to wall himself off—refused to numb himself—staying present to each moment, even refusing the drugged wine that would have allowed him to die in a haze rather than conscious. He chose to stay alive with everything left in him, feel what he could until he could feel no longer. If he asks us to do the same it is because he knows there is no way around pain and suffering—you have to go right through it. And he paid a price for that knowledge—his last words were “My God, my God, why?”

The hardest part of this story, I think, is the suspicion, the knowledge of my own participation in this awful passion play. In a few minutes we will hear, we will be, the crowd that was just yelling hosanna start yelling “crucify him”! Could I, could you, have possibly yelled that were we there? Try as I might to convince myself that I wouldn’t, I know the odds are pretty strong I would have eaten that last meal with Jesus with gusto, full of pronouncements about how I would never betray him, and at the first sign of trouble would have been out of there as fast as my legs could take me. Proof? Forget about Thursday in Gethsemane—how about Sunday in Philadelphia? Did I love God with my whole heart? Love my neighbor as myself? Of course not. I went about my business in the footsteps of Peter—the business of self-preservation.

The point, though, is not to engage in a guilt fest—crippled with knowledge of our ongoing betrayals. Of course we are all sinners. And the miracle, the wonder, is that Jesus takes the phrase that fell so glibly from the religious leader’s lips at his so called trial “His blood be upon us and our children” and turns it into the very occasion of our kinship with him. Into the sacrament of Holy Communion in which we eat his body and drink his blood. Perhaps as with the story of his messy death, we have become immune to what we say we are doing, eating his body and drinking his blood. For a wake up call go to the children’s service. With some regularity feedback is offered at Communion along the lines of “gross” or “is that really blood?” The children’s eyes tell me that what we are doing is a bizarre and sort of nasty thing.

For first century Jews this image would have been equally nasty. Eating flesh and drinking blood was an image reserved for your worst enemies—those you wished dead. That Jesus should bless these symbols of death and persecution and ask his disciples to see them as symbols of life and fellowship was just plain nuts, or maybe a bad joke. But I don’t think so. I think it was his way of telling them he still loved them—that his love was stronger than death and their only requirement was to be who they were and be loved by him.

As if he knew the truth about them and us. That we are pretty poor at staying awake, at loving as he loved, at responding to his calls for help and that we will likely bolt when things get hard. That is true. Equally true is that he loves us anyway. And that is the story of Holy Week in a nutshell. Whether or not we are aware of, can acknowledge our part in his death, he sees and knows and he lets us know that we are forgiven before we even

turn away from him. So nothing can separate us from him. Not guilt or remorse or sorrow. These have been blessed ahead of time and turned into the food and drink of forgiveness. What could have been just a bloody mess has been turned into the very heart of our faith, our life in him, our membership in his body. Because he forgives us before we turn away, the road back to him is always open. Nothing is in our way.

Today's story ends with Christ dead on the cross and asks us not to rush ahead to Easter—asks us to stay with him where he is. Stay with him and walk through the events of this week. Stay with him and hear the story again for the first time. Letting it hurt us, heal us and amaze us.

Amen.