



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MARCH 20, 2016
PALM SUNDAY

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy: Trusting God
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-48

It is funny the things we sometimes remember. I remember as a little boy lying on a cot in my grandparents bedroom, straining in the dark to hear what was going on in the rest of their big house, and thinking about the boy Samuel lying on a cot in the temple listening for a voice in the night. I remember sitting on my grandmother's lap reciting the Twenty-third Psalm and puzzling at her suggestion that I might one day be a minister.

Our granddaughter Savannah remembers the ceramic angels on our mantle and will often ask to see them when we video talk with them. If we happen to be outside and she sees the tops of the trees framed against the sky, she will say, "Moon, moon," remembering the nights when Deborah would take her outside to see the round, white moon high in the sky.

In his Gospel, Luke remembers the cloaks which the disciples put on the back of the donkey they had secured for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem. He also remembers how the other followers of Jesus went ahead of the donkey and spread their cloaks on the road, a sort of "poor man's red carpet" to honor the Messiah as he entered the Holy City. I find it odd, however, that he does not remember the branches—presumably palm—which the other three gospel writers tell us the people waved as the unorthodox procession made its way from Bethany to the eastern gate of Jerusalem. After all, we remember the palms branches, don't we? We don't have our children throw their coats on the floor in front of the candle and the cross. Palm branches make the procession much more like a parade, a real celebration. But Luke did not remember—or else he chose to forget.

Jesus entered the city and the last week of his life knowing full well what would happen, although the people with him had not a clue. Jesus chose this mode of entry—a donkey and the Golden Gate—for a reason. Jews at the time would have been familiar with the prophesy of Zechariah which stated, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). When a ruler entered the city in a spirit of peace, he rode on a donkey. When he returned from a triumph of

war, however, he rode in on a powerful steed. Roman generals would enter from the other side of Jerusalem mounted on a white horse which symbolized their might and victory. They would be followed by their captives who would later be executed. In stark contrast, Jesus, rode into Jerusalem on an animal of peace, preceded by a crowd of his disciples who spread their cloaks in front of him. By the end of the week, it would be the Jesus who would be executed.

We are reminded over and over that the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way—not simply to stop him, discredit him, or get rid of him—but to kill him. His entire ministry, from his time of preparation in the wilderness, through his teaching and healing in Galilee, to his arrival in Jerusalem, was focused upon this week.

I have to wonder how Jesus was able to ride through that gate into a city which he knew had not honored the prophets who came before him. How could he walk into the temple courtyard, overturn the merchant tables, and drive out the livestock and moneychangers, all the while knowing the kind of reaction that would result? How could he teach each day in the temple and prophesy the destruction of the city? How could he remind the people of their primary allegiance to God knowing that their leaders were cozy with the Romans? How could Jesus distill all of the laws and commandments into two—love God with all that you are and have and love your neighbor as yourself—knowing that the biases and temptations of daily life would constantly pull and tug on his followers? How could he talk about generosity and the inclusive, leveling power of the Kingdom of God knowing that people were preoccupied with their fear of scarcity and bold inequities of the Roman Empire? How could Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, sit at table with Judas knowing his friend would betray him? How in the world could Jesus ride into the city, walk through that treacherous week, and be lifted up, not to be glorified, but to be crucified? How could Jesus endure such a volatile and deadly week?

He leaned into the heart of the Holy. If there is any aspect of Lent that we understand, it is this week because the only way Jesus was able to get through the week—the entire week—and be raised on Easter morning was to trust in God.

I know that when I or anyone else tells you, in the midst of a very difficult and challenging time, to “trust God,” it often sounds naive, simplistic, and hollow. Sometimes we tell other people to trust God because we have no

other advice. We realize that we are out of ideas and the best thing we can do is to get out of the way. Let God take care of it from here. Trust God!

Yet real trust is anything but naive, simplistic, and hollow as Jesus demonstrates from the moment he climbs on the back of that donkey. It is clear that Jesus wants to be vulnerable. He wants to risk it all. He is willing to experience the anxiety, the frustration, the tension, the fear, the anger, the passion, and the drive to do something bigger than himself for a cause as large as the world. Jesus was willing to step off the curb onto that difficult road not knowing whether the street would catch his feet but trusting that God would. Trusting God is leaning into the heart of the Holy.

Jesus demonstrates for us that there are two ways we lean into the heart of the Holy when we trust. The first way of trusting God concerns our own being in the world. Many of you have told me of times when you had reached the limit of your knowledge and influence. When a loved one was ill, when business matters were not going well, when a relationship was teetering on falling apart, when a child was in more trouble than could be managed, when you had done all that you could to make things better and had no more tricks up your sleeve, you handed it all to God. You have shared with me the peace that came at that moment even though fear and grief remained. You trusted that somehow God would see you and everyone else through it all. You believed that there would be an “other end” and that whatever happened in order to get there, God would get you there. You have proved that fact over and over.

We cannot help but think about the first time we saw Jesus lean into the heart of the Holy. He was in the wilderness preparing for his ministry when the Tempter approached him. Although he was physically weak from a lack of food, there was a strength in him that was palpable even in the pages of scripture. He was tempted to throw himself into the arms of God, but not in the way of real trust. It was a test of God. Jesus resisted, demonstrating that his trust of his Heavenly Father was far greater than a mere test.

Three years later, it is a different Jesus who rode into Jerusalem. He had spent three years giving all that he had to the people around him. He had grown and matured in his faith. His trust was more grounded than before. His reliance on God was even deeper. It was a very human Jesus who took on the religious leaders and his fellow Jews that week. It was a very human Jesus who knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane pouring out his heart and tears in prayer. It was a very human Jesus, wounded by betrayal, exhausted by the

game being played between the Jewish leaders and Pilate and Herod. It was a very human Jesus who hung on the cross, feeling abandoned by, not only his friends, but by his Heavenly Father as well. Yet, it was his desire to ride into Jerusalem and walk all the way to the cross and on to the garden of resurrection because Jesus trusted that God would carry him through it all. And he did.

The other way in which we lean into God in trust is to take up the ministry Jesus bequeathed to us. The procession into Jerusalem by Jesus and his followers was a mockery of the Triumphal Marches of the Roman generals and Emperors. Those parades were about power and domination. Jesus was about authority and service. They were about victory through destruction. Jesus was about success through creation. They were about self-glory and the spoils of war. Jesus was about humility and self-giving. They were about the rich and powerful. Jesus was about the poor and disenfranchised.

To lean into the heart of the Holy in trust is to accept the call to take up Christ's ministry to the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the homeless, the hungry, the ill, the imprisoned, the refugee, the bitter, the angry, the wanderer searching for meaning, the soul yearning for God. It is a daunting and sometimes frightening ministry, but God calls us to minister to all of his children in this world and that includes a lot of folks who have nothing in common with us other than being God's children. If we trust God to guide and help us, we know that we can do whatever it is he calls us to do. If Jesus can make it from Gethsemane to the cross and out of the tomb, surely we can figure out a way to take care of our brothers and sisters here on earth.

It's funny what we remember . . . and what we forget. I remember those nights in my grandparents' bedroom because it was a place of love and safety. I remember my grandmother planting a seed about my future in ministry because she greatly influenced my thinking about that kind of calling. Savannah remembers the angels on our mantle because they are colorful and unique and remind her of our home. She remembers looking at the moon because it is an object of beauty and wonder which she discovered in the loving arms of her grandmother. We remember for good reasons.

I think palm branches are an important part of this day because they remind us of the high hopes the people had that Jesus would be their Messiah. I think the other Gospel writers thought it might be a nice twist to the story since Roman emperors and generals were also hailed with waving

palm branches. But I think Luke forgot the palms on purpose in order to emphasize the cloaks which the people spread before Jesus. When he had passed through the double gate known as Golden with one doorway known as “Repentance” and the other as “Mercy,” the people picked up their cloaks, shook them out and dusted them off, and then put them on. It was like robing themselves in Jesus’ humility and taking on the mantle of his ministry.

One hundred and twenty-nine years ago, Elisha Hoffman captured the essence of our discipleship in a hymn which used the image of leaning in trust on God. The familiar tune is a bit jaunty for this serious-minded text, but listen to the words that speak of Holy Week trust:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine . . .
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine . . .
O how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way . . .
O how bright the path grows from day to day . . .
What have I to dread, what have I to fear . . .
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.¹

When we lean into the heart of the Holy, we look, we listen, we touch, we taste, we smell the myriad ways God is present and at work in our world. When we lean into the heart of the Holy, we take on the ministry of Jesus and continue sharing the Gospel in word and deed. When we lean into the heart of the Holy, the power of this Good News throws us off-center so that we experience the world in a different way. We become unbalanced and realize that the world is often that way. That is when we lean into God’s strong arms and trust that he will steady us and not let us go. Lean into the heart of the Holy . . . and risk falling into the loving and steadfast arms of God. Amen.

¹Elisha A. Hoffman, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” (1887), *The Chalice Hymnal*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995), 560.

March 20, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

If there is anything that we know for certain, O God, it is that your steadfast love endures forever. Time and again we have been the recipients of that love—love that comforts, love that forgives, love that restores, love that saves, love that hopes—and we are grateful. Thank you for loving us even when we do not love ourselves and especially when we are most unlovable.

Today we join worshipers from thousands of years ago marching to the sanctuary to celebrate your presence among us. We call out for help and rejoice when it comes. We walk in darkness and are grateful when you bring light. We rely on our own resources but are thankful when you intervene to help us out of the messes we create for ourselves. We give thanks to you, O Lord, for you are indeed good!

We have walked most of this Lenten journey now but know that a dangerous and emotional week lies ahead. We pray that we will be mindful of all that Jesus endured for our sake. We pray that we will not take this week for granted but will pay attention to the meaning of what Jesus did for us. We pray that we will be willing to participate in his suffering so that we may also take part in his resurrection.

So heal our broken hearts and diseased bodies. Mend our fractured spirits and wounded minds. Cure our spiritual malaise and uninterested engagement in the world. Lead us from this bright and holy moment to the dark and frightening hour of Jesus' death. Lead us from the cross to the tomb and into the garden of new life. Lead us all the way from where we are now to the salvation you have prepared for us all; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.