

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we invite you to be in our midst. We invite you to dwell richly among us in your house. Let us continually consecrate this house with our love, our caring, our desire to honor all your people and your blessed creation. We often come here weighed down by concerns that are temporary, concerns that don't mean much in the grand scheme of things, concerns that are greater than our desire to acknowledge, and concerns that draw us away from one another. We are affected by this world that pulls us apart much more so than brings us together in our times of need. Renew us, we pray. Guide our steps that we may walk in a way that glorifies you and honors each other. Hear all those things that weigh us down and direct us to faithfulness, O God of renewal and everlasting care.

God, we stand on the precipice of a week we do not fully understand, on the story of a plan we do not fully understand, with potential to change us that we do not fully understand. God, we come into this week fully human, thinking we know the story, thinking we know what it all means, when instead you surprise us with a new take, a new perspective, new life in what can be an old story. Help us to surpass the sins of that generation in thinking we know how it all works when you are consistently the author of new life where we least expect it. We pray all these things in the name of the main character of this timeless story we hear again with new ears and see with new eyes, Jesus the Christ, who still teaches us to pray as one people that timeless and renewed prayer...

SERMON

What person are you? When it comes to movies or books or television programs, when it comes to your favorite stories, are you a one-and-done? Or do you go back time and again? This is the type of the person I am: I love to read stories time and again. I love

to watch the same movie over and over. I know what's going to happen, but I get caught up in the story anyway. I know Darth Vader is Anakin Skywalker, that he is the father of Luke Skywalker, but that doesn't stop me from feeling the same when he announces it to the world. I don't stop feeling the drama when Darth Vader turns back to the light by ending the reign of Emperor Palpatine. I feel I glean something new every time I read or watch that story again. The only exception is a game. I don't mind watching highlights, especially if they go my way, but I'm not a huge fan of watching a sports game again. On the other hand, my wife is entirely different. She has told me that she only wants to see it or read it once. What's the use of doing it again? She already knows what's going to happen, so why bother watching it again?

Perhaps you find yourself agreeing with one of us; we are two ends of the spectrum. In either side there is good sense for why we feel like we do, and in both sides there is danger if you take it too far. You can especially feel that way in these walls. We come to church to hear the important stories of the faith more than once. Just look at the Christian Year: we hear the same stories over and over again each year. We hear the Christmas story at the end of Advent. We hear the Easter story at the end of Lent and Holy Week. Every season has a story and a reason why we celebrate it the way we do.

Today, we hear again a very important story, the tale of Jesus' timeless entry into the capitol city of Jerusalem. In hearing these stories again, we have two choices. We can tell them again in the same old way because we know exactly what they are and why we tell them. We can do the same old thing and celebrate them the same way with the same ears and same sight and find it's the same thing as last year, or we can choose something different. We can choose the best of both worlds, the best of both perspectives. We can

dismiss them as something we've heard before, or we can choose to hear them again with renewed hearing and renewed sight as if we are hearing it for the first time. After all, the Christian faith is timeless, but it is not dry, wrote, and dead.

Today we recognize the beginning of the Holiest Week in all of Christianity. Beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with Good Friday, Holy Week dwarfs all other holidays, save one, which comes next Sunday. Christmas, Advent, Lent, Pentecost: it leaves everything behind in its magnitude and its message. It all begins with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem upon a young donkey. Where it goes from there is what matters. Mostly, for the crowds that welcomed him with joy and for us today, there is one thing either enhancing or preventing them from worshipping the Christ fully: expectations, whether they be heartfelt and directed toward God or focused on personal desires and goals. Let us look into this story, how the people around him reacted with expectation, and see how we can more faithfully approach a week we seem to know everything about with expectations good and sound.

Our two scripture lessons for today are two accounts of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. The first, from John, has the people attending the festival in Jerusalem hearing that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, stop what they were doing, grabbed palm branches and waved them as he came in. In this telling, Jesus finds a young donkey after his entry and sits on it to fulfill the scripture that he is the peaceful king written of in the book of Zechariah, not the warrior as they might have thought, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. In Mark, the story has a few different twists. In this account, Jesus foretells the donkey being available to two of his disciples as they go retrieve it. But the party is the same. The people here yell out a phrase that is important but it loaded with a lot of hopes

and fears attached to it: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Ancestor David!"

Depending on how one announce it and understand it, the ministry of Jesus is that fulfillment, or one will left sorely disappointed by how his ministry is demonstrated in Jerusalem.

Our focus today is on the man on the young donkey, and with good reason. With him and the events of this week, history will be forever changed. But he is not alone here. He is surrounded by so many people, singing praises, waving palms, joyfully expectant. Each of these people is there for a different reason but united in joy. And yet, just a few days later, they were the same people in the crowd yelling how they wanted the Bandit Barabbas freed and this Jesus, King of the Jews, to be crucified. What happened to change the tone so much? How does one go from so beloved to so despised and reviled? The people had expectations of Jesus that were never met. Expectations can be either so powerful or so toxic and destructive, depending on how we understand them, how we utilize them, or how we allow them to control us. More often than not, it can be the last.

Expectations are something we all carry. It might be a career, a goal, or the outcome of a project. Many times, they can be really subtle; we never make them known. Sometimes we don't really know that we have them until they are made good or not fulfilled. We hope in them, but when they are not met, they can often lead us to anger, to suspicion, to rejection, or just frustration. Those who fill out an NCAA Basketball Tournament Bracket make our expectations well known and get highly upset when a team fails on us. The people in Jerusalem probably had great expectations of this Jesus. Perhaps they heard that this was the long-awaited Messiah. When that word comes up, starting with M, seven letters, there is so much unsaid that goes with the title. There were so many

expectations around the Messiah in Jesus' time, attached from so many generations in despair and fear, that the mystique around the Messiah soon became more myth than anything else. The Messiah, they knew, was a descendent of King David and would sit on David's throne for all eternity. So, over time, that went from the Messiah being God's anointed to this Messiah King would be a great warrior and would kick out the occupying Roman force from God's promised land. From there, the Messiah would create the Kingdom of God on earth one handed and end trial and pain forever. All this would happen, seemingly, before breakfast. Jesus did meet some of the requirements; he openly spoke out against the Romans and the Temple Authorities who colluded with them, but he didn't bring an army ready to take them down. What else could there be with unfilled expectations? Disappointment. He didn't meet what they wanted, so he wasn't the real deal. He had to go. This obviously wasn't the Messiah they'd been waiting for, the one that over time became more of a myth than God's chosen one, so it's time to take out the trash. These unfaithful expectations of the Messiah didn't abide by the fullness of scripture, but the people, over time, had gotten an idea in their mind about what the Messiah would obviously look like, and Jesus didn't fit the bill. What began in hopefulness soon ended in darkness, but that didn't mean that God's plan couldn't be done.

It's not just them; it's us. Expectation is something we carry into this week as well. We can easily find ourselves mapping out exactly what we want from this week and what we think will happen. We think we know the story piece by piece and find ourselves losing the wonder of each event. Whether you have heard the story never before or heard it more times than you can count, I invite you to leave expectation aside in all of its forms this week. Easter is the holiest of the holy holidays, and it cannot happen without all that comes

before it in Holy Week. Yes, we know that Jesus will die, but that death will turn into an incredible resurrection. Either way, that shouldn't matter in how we live into the story this week. Holy Week, as we know it, should remain holy, and we do that by opening ourselves up to the amazing story.

Take in the story of Holy Week with wonder, with curiosity, with horror, with sadness. What do you expect to find on Maundy Thursday? Set it aside and come to seek the Lord. What do you expect to find on Good Friday? Set it aside and come to seek the Lord. What do you expect to find on Easter? Set it aside and come to seek the Lord. These are not obligations. These are not services. They are the opportunity to find God in the most trying week of all, the most fulfilling week of all, the Holiest Week of all. There are few greater expressions of care and compassion in the bible than John's telling of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples that Thursday evening. There are few greater expressions of vulnerability than Jesus praying in the Garden, "Let this cup pass from me, but your will be done." There are few greater expressions of God's love in the Bible than Jesus, hung on the cross that fateful Friday afternoon, praying for those who condemned him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." With new eyes, and the eyes of expectation open to God's movement, let us look anew at these stories and find what message God has in them for us, for our church, for our age.

It doesn't matter whether we like hearing the same story time and again or find that once is good enough. There is always room for newness in the midst of expectation. Expectation can be the bringer of hope or it can become too rigid and fixed on our own desires. Expectation can become more about what we want than what can and should take place. The people of Palm Sunday sang joyfully for their savior, only to yell for his

crucifixion a few days later when he didn't meet their expectations, expectations that were centuries in the making but weren't a part of God's spectacular plan that week. How are our expectations helping or hurting us? Sure, we know what the course of this week will look like, what the climax and resolution of Jesus' trial and death will look like, but in our expectations, are we forgetting to hear the story with new ears and see the events with new eyes? Perhaps God is speaking to us anew through these timeless events. What are you expecting from this week? I hope it is the renewed voice of God, who comes and delivers the message through what we can sometimes consider the same old thing. The story may seem dry, but open yourself up to new possibilities, for God is always just around the corner. Amen and Amen.