

Sermon, Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024, Entering the City

As I prepared for today, I tried to imagine what Jesus may have been thinking and feeling when he journeyed to and entered the city of Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday. For inspiration, I am especially indebted to Jason Porterfield for his book *Fight Like Jesus: How Jesus Waged Peace Throughout Holy Week*.¹ This morning, I invite you to join me in imagining this journey and more importantly, I invite you to listen for invitations from the Spirit on how what Jesus might have thought and felt so many years ago might apply to us today. So now in the voice of Jesus.

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It was the week before the yearly Passover Festival, the time of year when we Jews from far and wide journeyed to the city of Jerusalem, to celebrate when God had delivered us out of slavery in Egypt. While Passover was a celebration of our escape from slavery, it was also a painful reminder that we were no longer free. Year after year, we came together to recall the time God won our freedom. And, year after year, my people hoped God would do so again. But, as to when and how God would make that happen, few agreed.

My twelve disciples and I, along with a number of other men and women who had travelled with me around Galilee, joined other pilgrims on the journey, walking from Jericho to the city of Jerusalem.

For three years I had tried to tell people about the kingdom of God. I had tried to tell them it was about love, peace, and justice. For example, one time I talked about seeds, and the need for seeds to die, in order to grow and bear fruit.

When I taught my disciples how to pray, I modelled focusing first on God and God's will before making other requests.

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When asked, "what is the most important commandment?", I quoted one from Moses and then added another line for clarification.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength. (Duet.6.5)

Love your neighbour as you love yourself.

This commandment is actually a summary of the 10 Commandments. The first four commandments focus on loving God, and the rest focus on loving our neighbours as ourselves.

¹ Jason Porterfield, *Fight Like Jesus: How Jesus Waged Peace Throughout Holy Week*, (VA: Herald Press, 2022).

Make God #1, don't worship idols, watch how you use God's name
Keep Sunday's holy, honour your parents this is our aim.
Do not kill, keep your marriage promises, don't steel other's things.
Do not lie, be satisfied with what you have that's what wisdom brings.

In addition to preaching about the kingdom of God, I had tried to demonstrate the kingdom of God. I did this by valuing men and women, rich and poor, adults and children, Jews and Gentiles. I demonstrated the kingdom of God by healing the sick. For example: a man with leprosy, a dying girl, a hemorrhaging woman, a deaf and mute man, a blind man, and people with evil spirits. I fed thousands. I even forgave a paralytic man his sins and raised my friend, Lazarus, from the dead. I got into trouble with the religious leaders for doing the last two, because they felt only God could forgive sin and raise people from the dead, and they didn't accept me as the Messiah.

While I had tried to show and tell about the kingdom of God, I wasn't sure if my disciples, much less others, really caught on. I was afraid that some of my disciples were anticipating a future of greatness and glory rather than sacrifice and servanthood. I tried hard to help them understand that the Kingdom of God was not like the kingdoms of this world. I was sad when they argued about which of them was the greatest.

When I told my disciples that it was time for me to journey to Jerusalem, I could see both worry and excitement on their faces. I had told them a number of times of the dangers that lay ahead. I had told them that speaking truth to power was risky. While it was not my mission to die, I knew that I was offensive to those wielding power, and that my death would be the likely result. Although the Romans were governing Judea, there were religious leaders in Jerusalem, who also had power and influence. And they wanted me out of the way.

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I had planned for this trip to the city of Jerusalem. More than anything, I longed for my followers to know the importance of making peace. On a previous visit to Jerusalem, I arranged to borrow a donkey colt. Its owner had questioned me, saying that it had never been ridden. But I insisted, a donkey colt was what I needed for several reasons. I wanted people to think of King David who gave his own mule to his son Solomon when Solomon was crowned king. I wanted people to think of Zechariah's prophecy (9:9) which said:

“Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout!

Your king has won a victory, and he is coming to you.

He is humble and rides on a donkey,
he comes on the colt of a donkey.”

By riding on a donkey, I would be announcing myself as the Messiah, the anointed one, the long-awaited King of Israel. But I also hoped my people would remember the next verse in Zechariah’s prophecy. It clearly described what kind of king I would be. It said:

“I, the Lord, will take away war chariots and war horses
from Israel and Jerusalem.
Bows that were made for battle will be broken.
I will bring peace to nations,
and your king will rule from sea to sea.
His kingdom will reach from the Euphrates River across the earth.”

In my world, leaders rode horses if they rode to war but donkeys if they came in peace. Peace was at the core of my mission. Not just the absence of war, but right relationships with God, with others, with all creation & with oneself.

Donkeys were also known to be work animals, servants of the people. Hopefully the people would understand that I came to serve them when they saw me riding on a donkey.

When we finally arrived at the town of Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, we stopped at the house of my friends, Mary, Martha & Lazarus. We had walked 27 kilometres, up hill and down, and we still had about 3 more to go, to get to the city of Jerusalem. I was tired and it felt so good to rest.

As I had planned, I sent two of my disciples, to a village close by, with instructions to untie a donkey colt, that they would find at a certain spot, and bring it to me. They looked at me as if to ask “Are you crazy? You want us to steal a donkey colt?” I reassured them, saying: “If anyone questions you, just say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back.’” With raised eyebrows they left to do as I asked.

And sure enough, they told me later, that when they got to the village, they found the donkey colt just as I had promised and began to untie it. Apparently, some bystanders noticed and called the owner, who asked, “What are you doing?” They replied: “The Lord needs it and will send it back,” and they were allowed to bring the donkey colt to me. When they arrived with the poor donkey colt, it was shaking in fear. Since it had never been ridden, I knew I had my work cut out for me. I spoke quietly to it and stroked it softly with long soothing strokes. Eventually it stopped shaking. There was

no saddle, so my disciples put their coats on it and the donkey colt allowed me to get on it's back without a fuss. We started off with my feet almost reaching the ground.

People spread their cloaks on the road, imitating the coronation of past Kings of Israel. They waved palm branches, a symbol of a revolution and independence. Word had spread to my followers in Jerusalem that I was coming, and they poured out to meet me. With them were many other people from Jerusalem, who had heard about my raising Lazarus from the dead.

People in front of us... and behind us ... were shouting things like: "Hosanna!" Which means, "save us, now!" It was an urgent cry for help. The crowds recited a line from the psalms, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and added a few words not found in the psalms, saying: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" It was clear that they wanted a military king like David to rescue them from Rome. Many hoped I would set up my throne in Jerusalem immediately. Many wanted me to bring peace through violent means.

But my peace was different. I had come to save them - but not in the manner many desired. I was fearful of what their responses would be, when they realized that this wasn't the kind of kingdom I was establishing. Overcome with excitement, few noticed my sadness at their lack of understanding, as the joyful procession made its way into the city of Jerusalem.

When I arrived in Jerusalem, I immediately went to the temple's outer court and looked around. This area was set aside for non-Jews to pray, and I knew that come tomorrow, it would be filled with money changers, and buyers and sellers of cattle, sheep, pigeons, and doves to be sold for sacrifices.

I found myself remembering many good visits to this temple, but today, somehow it all felt different. While temple sacrifices were an important part of atoning for sin and giving thanks to God, I had seen all too often how making these sacrifices, had become more important to people, than offering mercy and love to others. I often found myself arguing with my brothers, the Pharisees about this.

As I was looking at the tables of the money changers set up for tomorrow's business, mercy and love seemed overshadowed to me. I wondered: Would this court really be a welcoming place for people of all nations tomorrow? Would people leave resolved to repent from their sin or change their whole way of thinking and acting? Would people leave knowing that their holy offerings, were not a substitute for living their faith day to day? I was not convinced.

Oh, how I wished my people would understand the things that make for peace! I wished that they realized that as long as there is sin and injustice, there could not be lasting peace. Since it was already late, I decided to return to Bethany, with my twelve disciples for the night.

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That night I had trouble getting to sleep. I prayed for wisdom, direction, strength and courage, for the difficult days ahead.

I wondered, how might I show my people, that worshipping God meant prioritizing mercy and love. That worshipping God meant making personal sacrifices, in order to love others. Might chasing out a few animals from the outer court, or overturning some of the tables of the money changers help make my point?

I wondered; what else could I do, in the time I had left on earth, to remind my followers of the things I had tried to teach them? Might imitating the duties of servants and washing my disciple's feet, remind them of my call to servanthood?

I wondered; what will my followers now, and in generations to come, choose to do?

Would they choose to do my father's will rather than their own?

Would they sacrifice power, wealth, and glory, violence, pride, and selfishness, in order to love their neighbours and their enemies and work for peace?

I prayed that they would and then was able to sleep.