

4.2.23 Sermon

Palm Sunday

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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I'm so struck even already just in worship, in prayer before, in preparation before that, and worship this morning.

Perception is so powerful. Thinking just again of what Sophia was bringing after that song. When we see God as the author of those bad things, it's really hard to reconcile how he's with us and like, how is he good? If he's creating these bad things, and, you know, we try to spiritually bypass that cognitive dissonance by creating some theology around like, but he's doing it for our good. But like you said, I mean, if he's a good parent, what good parent would do that? Like, we wouldn't do that. That's not what love looks like.

But when those things happen, and they do, a good parent is with you. A good friend is someone who says, I'm gonna be with you, I'm not gonna leave you. We're gonna walk through this together, we're gonna get through it. We'll be together on the other side.

Perception. Even the title of the song Reckless Love. When Cory Asbury wrote it, there was a lot of backlash and questioning to him about that reckless love. How can you call God reckless? How can you say a love is reckless? But perception? It's because it's deemed reckless by the world, and by the standards of this world, who would leave the 99, Shore things to go after the one? Like, what's the risk evaluation? They're like, what's the ROI? One? Potential one. So yeah, the

world looks at that love. So, it's the world's perception that says that love is reckless. I don't get that I would not do that. But the love of God shows us time and again.

That's their choice. We, all of us individually, are their choice. And this is reason 4,762,520. For that I am so grateful for both community and a multiplicity of voices. Because when we get a morning, like this morning, like all these little things start coming together. And it's so confirming, I've shared before when I've preached that, during the process of preparing for the sermon, there's usually a point where I recognize my sermon preaching back to me, or God preaching back to me through my sermon. And it's kind of like, I came into this morning without that, like, I don't know, I'm just trusting. And that's okay, too. I trust that God is faithful. I trust that God will use whatever I bring. Everything I say, perception, again, is powerful. Everything I say you're perceiving your own way anyway. So, I trust that the Holy Spirit as an interpreter will take whatever I can bring with my good intentions, and bring fruit within each of your lives. So, I came into this morning, trusting but unsure.

And then we started praying out in elder prayer. And Pastor Tracy said, Kevin, would you bring in a word? I don't know. I don't feel like I have a succinct nugget to share. And people started sharing. And my uncertainty even within myself began to become confirmed. And I started hearing words, actual sentences from my sermon, being spoken by all of the different people. And then I said as one of the people were sharing, "Did you hear what Brigitte was just playing in there during practice while you were speaking this word?" and how that's also confirming the same thing. So, without further ado, I am very excited for this morning.

I'm already so blessed by what's been shared and what's been, you know, turned up in this dirty soil in the dirt. So, let's dig in.

Happy Palm Sunday, everyone!

Show of hands. How many of you were surprised when you saw the palms here this morning and only then realized it was Palm Sunday? Yes. Yes, folks ready?

You're not next Sunday is Easter Sunday and this is your only warning flare. Next order of business. How many of you upon realizing it was Palm Sunday immediately set to crafting your palm into a cross? Yeah, that's what all the cool Christians did in the church I grew up in, you too. And I couldn't do it then and I can't do it now. But my lovely wife Erica could even back then. And she still can. So, if you need help in that department, she's your girl. Not me. Her. Erica, the palm whisperer, which sounds like something different. But at any rate, happy Palm Sunday or, or Passion Sunday, if you like, I've heard it both ways. But mostly Palm Sunday for me. As I've mentioned before, I grew up in the church. So, I've heard roughly 41 Palm Sunday sermons are near about in like Advent, this was always a pretty busy season for both our family and our church.

How about you? Lots of extra services, lots of extra parts at those services. So, everyone, get out your Holy Week bingo cards, and I'll start walking you through some of my services from my faith tradition growing up, and we can see how collects the most squares all in good fun. For those of you who didn't grow up in the church, don't worry. This is also just an excuse for me to story through some nearly forgotten memories and process some early childhood traumas. Just kidding, I had a pretty good childhood.

The center square today will be Palm Sunday, so you can all check that guy off. How many of you grew up celebrating come Sunday, probably most of us who had grown up in any faith tradition, it is a classic. Now my church must have been sleeping a bit on the beginning of Holy Week, because we didn't have any special services on holy Monday, holy Tuesday, or holy Wednesday. Apparently, you had to give a day a codename for our church to get out of bed for it. Enter Maundy Thursday. How many of you grew up recognizing Maundy Thursday? And how many of you couldn't recognize a Maundy if you were staring it in the face? Again, don't worry. I mean, does anyone actually know what a Maundy is? Or what it means?

Well, I'm glad you asked. According to Merriam Webster, in the etymology, Section Maundy comes from the Middle English Monday, which is not helpful at all. This is from the Old French Monday, and from the Latin Mandatum, which

more closely resembles our word mandate, or command. But mandate Thursday just doesn't have the same ring.

This title is taken from the words of Jesus to the disciples after washing their feet at the Last Supper and saying, "A new commandment, I give it to you, that you love one another." No love mandate, that's one I can get behind. So unsurprisingly, this service commemorates the Last Supper and the events that took place at that supper. Sometimes, the events were acted out by 12 men from our church – humblebrag on my childhood UMC for having that kind of male attendance to pull that off. In other years, the church hosted a Seder meal on Maundy Thursday, which I know can be a sensitive subject at present, as some of the Jewish faith deem this as cultural appropriation by Christians, and honestly, I can see both sides there. Jesus was and is Jewish. But thanks to the centered set, I will leave the resolution of that religious and political debate to each of you.

For those of you in the dark, the Seder meals of my childhood were a Christian reenactment of some of the traditional elements of a Jewish Passover meal, wherein Jesus was then recognized as the fulfillment of those various symbols. From there, we really picked up the pace. Good Friday was chock-full, starting with the crosswalk, which was a super seeker-sensitive interdenominational community event where we carried a life-size cross around our town, stopping at various points to read Scripture commonly referred to as the Stations of the Cross, along with prayers, hymns, and meditations. It started at noon and lasted until 3 pm to align with the traditional timeline of the original events; we were really fun.

Then, our youth group got together to dye eggs, eat pizza, and plan and practice that evening's Tenebrae service. Did any of you ever attend a Tenebrae service? Did any of you ever dye eggs or eat pizza? Hey, a couple more squares will count them.

The Tenebrae service was a very somber one, so you weren't missing a whole lot if that's not your thing. Tenebrae means darkness, if that gives you any indication. The service was basically like Advent in reverse. There were large

brass candelabras that all started lit, and then as the different readings and songs progressed, candles were extinguished. When the service concluded, everyone was left in the dark and asked to leave in silence. This was hosted by our youth group.

So, after pulling that one off, we had a youth lock-in at the church. We spent the night in the church and then awoke the next morning to hide the eggs we had dyed for the community-wide Easter egg hunt that our youth group had hosted for our entire community. For as long as I have memory, the eggs were real and dyed, at least for the first couple of years of my youth group experience. But after a rainy year forced the egg hunt inside, and not all of the real eggs were found in the nursery, hidden by teenagers and found or not found by infants. The eggs switched to plastic and were filled with candy and gift certificates thereafter, which honestly went over much better with parents and kids alike. I mean, one can only eat so much egg salad. Can I get an amen?

Home for a quick nap after having stayed up most of the night at the lock-in, and then back the next morning bright and early at 6 am for the sunrise service. That was butts in seats in your Easter best at 6 am. Then, fresh baked hot cross buns, except some years they had raisins, rude. And then we kind of just hung out with the other holy people who had made it for the sunrise service, achievement unlocked, until regular morning service. And then, and only then, did we get to go home and look for our Easter baskets. And have your Easter dinner. Did I miss anything?

Well, to be honest, sometimes Jesus. To be clear, not one of those things was bad, not one of them. In fact, each of them was actually an opportunity to connect with Jesus. But busyness can very easily lead to viewing the collective events as an agenda that we just have to get through. Exactly. And becoming a distraction or even the focus itself isn't easy to get caught up in the rush of things. And that's exactly what happened in today's text too.

And I even want to hesitate calling it today's text, because we hear that phrase a lot. Today's text, like every week, I feel like we say that at least once if not

multiple times. And the actual text of today's text is one that we've probably heard many times: it's Palm Sunday.

I think we can start to read them like a text, two-dimensionally, statically, you know, frozen on the page, ink long dried. But that isn't how they happened. They happened just like this morning is happening for us: unscripted, yet unwritten, live and human, and messy, dirty. It happened to different people differently. There were different experiences. All four Gospels include this experience of Palm Sunday, and much about them is the same. But then there are also different angles and perspectives, just like each of us would recount this morning in our own ways, even while having shared the same experience.

So, Matthew, although written second, is in the order of the Gospels. So, we'll go that way. Matthew's story is in chapter 21. And Matthew places this story right after Jesus has compassion on two blind men along the roadside, and he gives them their sight, which you may remember from one of my previous sermons just at the last big Hebrew festival that we talked about in John's account, the Feast of Tabernacles, or tents or booths. He healed a blind man there, and we talked about how that was a really special and significant miracle because it was believed that only the Messiah could give sight. So other prophets could heal other people, who even brought people back from the dead. We've read those stories in the Old Testament at that time. But there had not been a record of someone being healed from a given sight; that was thought to be in their tradition as unique to the Messiah.

And so, from that, Matthew then leads into the Messiah's entry into Jerusalem. Mark also places his experience after the healing of a blind man; his account is in chapter 11. His account is of a singular blind man, but he's named Bartimaeus. And there's a bit more dialogue back and forth between Bartimaeus and Jesus. And again, this major messianic miracle precedes what reflection will later have both Matthew and Mark describing as the triumphant entry.

Luke's telling comes after the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. You guys remember Zacchaeus. Luke is actually the only gospel that includes Zacchaeus at all. It's unique to Luke. And you may remember that Jesus goes to his house

and, while there, he shares in the parable of the ten minas and the responsibility of those who have been given much.

In each of these gospel accounts, we see different aspects and perspectives of Palm Sunday, reminding us that the experience was multifaceted and human, just like our own experiences today. It's essential to remember the heart of the story and the connection to Jesus amidst the busyness and distractions that can come with such events. By doing so, we can better understand and appreciate the significance of Palm Sunday and its place in our faith journey.

And then there's John, our traveling companion of an indeterminate amount of time, who places this after Jesus visits his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at their house some time after Jesus had resurrected Lazarus from the dead, which you may remember from my sermon last May. John is the only gospel that includes that story. This monumental, high-profile, attention-grabbing miracle is only in John. John even goes so far as to say that this dinner happened, and I quote, "six days before the Passover," as if to set the record straight. This was actually what happened right before today's events.

He has the processional starting with the departure from their house in Bethany the next day, heading to Bethpage where the other three gospels pick up the story of the triumphal entry. And John links the critical mass that's following Jesus here to those who had been at the healing of the raising of Lazarus. The crowd that had seen him do that followed him is the story in John. So, the stage is set. Jesus has healed the blind. He's met the tax collector in the tree. He has had dinner at his house, the "guest of a sinner." He has also gone to have dinner with his dearest friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. The expensive jar of perfume has been broken at his feet, shade has been thrown by Judas, the money keeper, and the next morning they set out for Jerusalem, miracle chasers in tow. This guy heals the blind and wakes men from the dead. Could it really be the long-awaited Messiah?

They're heading into Jerusalem again for the Feast of the Passover, as was their custom. This is the start of the spring cycle of the Jewish feasts. The feasts that were in the spring cycle were the Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, and

Pentecost. Passover was the feast that kicked off the new Jewish year. So, can you imagine if the optimism of the new year, like the optimism of January, aligned with the spirit-raising spring solstice and more daylight that improves all of our mood and outlook? Spring is in the air, new life is blooming, and hope is high. They may even remember that at last year's Passover, Jesus fed 5,000 men plus women and children while living off the 23rd Psalm and also paralleling the story of Moses leading Israel out of Egypt. And those parallels were as high as their hopes. So, you may remember that the Roman occupation was bad then, a year ago, and it was no better now. Unless this guy is really the Davidic line deliverer, the prophesied promise, their modern-day Moses, the Messiah. And from there, herd mentality sets in and sets in hard. The choruses with which they had been raised raised their collective chest until Psalm 118 comes a-boilingly bursting forth: "Hosanna to the Son of David," which is literally "Oh save us, son of the great defender." "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven." And this is from the Hallel, which is the Hebrew word for praise, like "Hallelujah." Praise to Yahweh. Hallelujah.

The Hallel was the section of Psalms 113 to 118 that was sung in liturgical recitation at all three of the major feasts that called on them to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem: the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot. Two of those I've preached on previously, so I will spare you a lot of that today. You can listen back if you are so inclined. But get this: these words from Psalm 113 to Psalm 118 run deep in these people's veins. So how can I put this? Think of Philadelphia sports fans and the Eagles fight song. And the Messiah is like the ultimate long-awaited Super Bowl win. Yeah, that should do it. Excited fans can get a little unruly.

Rowdy crowds and all bets are off. And this isn't like a parade. I think we sometimes picture it like a parade. I mean, I did, like people were standing on the sidelines and Jesus was marching down the center. But Matthew and Mark both make it clear that the crowd, this rowdy crowd, was part of the processional. The crowds that went ahead and the crowds that followed were all shouting loudly, "Save us, King Jesus." So, they're part of it, like this is a mob, and they're moving like a mob coming into Jerusalem, shouting "Hosanna." "This is the king! He's the

one! He's the deliverer! Save us, King Jesus!" And they all know the words, so they all start singing along.

So, it doesn't take much to imagine how this riled-up following is perceived by those in power. Make no mistake, this was dangerous, as history will prove. These claims were an insult to the Jewish leaders who were convinced that this man was not the Messiah. So those men in power, not happy. And this was also an offense to the Romans, for whom Caesar was king. So, let me assure you, the shouting of the masses was speaking louder than the significantly more subtle symbolic nature of Jesus riding into town on a donkey, albeit a symbol of peace. No, all these people in power see a mob. They see cloaks laid low and palms held high as symbols of allegiance and victory and the most dangerous thing of all, hope. And everyone on every side missed it. I missed it many times.

It can be easy to miss, to get swept up in the action just like they did. Where's Jesus in all this? In all my years growing up with this story, I think I pictured Jesus kind of soaking it in. Relishing in the revelry, enjoying this short-lived victory lap, and not in a prideful way, just receiving this deposit of affirmation and socking it away for the rainy days that he knows are ahead, just literally days away.

But look again, amidst the cheering and the singing of their fight song EAGO II S. For Hosanna, to the son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, which he literally is. Jesus is in the middle of the crowd. And in the middle of all of that, we read in Luke 19, verses 41 and 42: As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it, and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes."

And just so you don't think that I'm taking this out of context to make some different point, the verses that immediately precede this, verses 37 and 38, say: When he came near the place where the road goes down to the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen. "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" And then the next verses are the

exchange with the Pharisees who tell him to get the people in line, and then Jesus' spicy or just mystical response: "If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

So, after all of that, and before he arrives at the gate of the city, the Golden Gate on the eastern side, the gate called Beautiful, the gate whose doors are named the Gate of Mercy and the Gate of Repentance. The gate whose Jewish tradition foretold would be the gate through which the Messiah would enter—a tradition so deeply held, perpetuated, and believed that later rulers would seal this door shut with 16 feet of cement. And it has been sealed that way for 500 years.

So right in the middle of all of that, before the gate and after the praising, N.T. Wright says it this way: "The crowd went wild as they got nearer. This was the moment they'd been waiting for. All the old songs came flooding back, and they were singing, chanting, cheering, and laughing. At last their dreams were going to come true. But in the middle of it all, their leader wasn't singing. He was in tears."

Yes, their dreams were indeed coming true. But not in the way they had imagined. He was not the king they expected. Not like the monarchs of old who sat on their jeweled and ivory thrones dispensing their justice and wisdom. Nor was he the great warrior king some had wanted. He didn't raise an army and ride to battle at its head. He was riding on a donkey. And he was weeping, weeping for the dream that had to die, weeping for the sword that would pierce his supporters to the soul, weeping for the kingdom that wasn't, as well as the kingdom that was.

Isn't that beautifully said? So, here's Jesus, weeping. And you know what this word means? Weeping. Climo: to sob, to wail loudly, to lament. And just to be clear, they have a word, dakruo, for crying softly. But Luke doesn't use that one. Here he uses Climo, the loud one, the loud cry. The word picture is weeping as a sign of pain or grief, mourning for something that is dead. Like the way Mary wept when Lazarus, her brother, had died, and she met Jesus on the road. You may remember, when Jesus saw her Climo, weeping bitterly, and the Jews who were with her also weeping, he was deeply moved. And then he himself dakruoed, the soft tears, perhaps because he knew what he was about to do, and that to him, Lazarus was not dead.

But on this day, amid the palms and the singing of psalms, he climoed, cried the loud cry, weeping for the dream that had to die. Have any of you ever had a dream that died? Yeah, me too. It happens. Death is an inevitable part of living.

The two are inexorably linked. There's this scene in one of my favorite shows, Parks and Rec. One of the characters, Chris Trager, played by Rob Lowe, who is eternally optimistic, keeps trying to fix his pregnant partner's problems. Of course, for anyone who is married or ever been in a relationship, you will know that that does not work. It only makes things worse.

So, he's sharing this experience with his friends who tell him what she needs from you is to just look her in the eyes, nod your head and say those two magic words: "That sucks." Sometimes, no, it's true. Those two words have saved my marriage on more than one account. Because sometimes dreams die. And that sucks. Sometimes life is hard and hits you with an emotional atom bomb in your health, or your job or fill in the blank. Sometimes you do everything right and everything still turns out wrong. And when that happens in my life, it comforts me when people don't try to fix or dismiss my pain or grieving, but acknowledge it. Sometimes even by saying that sucks, because sometimes it does.

Sometimes, you can be born in a town called Bethlehem, which means house of bread, where the lambs for the temple sacrifice were believed to be raised. You can be welcomed by their shepherds. You can preach peace, love and generosity. You can reframe the law as matters of the heart and encompassed by the greatest law love. You can frequently enter Jerusalem by way of the sheep gate in the northeast corner rather than the Golden Gate, just like we observed Jesus do in John chapter five after healing the man that was paralyzed by the paralytic before entering it and he says he came in through the sheep gate. And they say they believe that was the gate that he most preferred, which was the gate in the northeast corner, the inconspicuous one tucked back in a way where they just brought the lambs in for the sacrifice.

Which is also if you look back in Nehemiah, the first gate that they rebuilt when they rebuilt the wall, this huge gate. And then on this Sunday, you can enter into

Jerusalem which literally translates city of peace to rue Salam, riding on a donkey, a symbol of peace. And you can still have everyone praising you as the Messiah, the conqueror, coming to vanquish the Romans. Sometimes, that will break your heart, even if you are God.

So, when your heart is broken, you're not alone. Jesus knows heartbreak. He knows what it is to feel alone or invisible for who he really is, even when surrounded by a crowd of people. He knows what it's like to cry, the loud cry, and the soft cry, the full gamut of crying. If you even you had only known on this day, what would bring you peace. But now it is hidden from your eyes. And if we're honest, can't relate to the crowd. We think we know what will bring us peace. Maybe we're even certain of it. If I just had blank, or once I blank, then I will arrive and have peace.

And here's the truth. None of that brings lasting peace. Probably because none of that lasts. We place our hope in a lot of temporal things. We are very short-sighted people. But life is a long-range game. I mean, just take one moment and try to recall. What was your greatest problem one year ago today? Can you even think of it? Do you even remember? And yet at that time, it may have felt insurmountable. But here we are. Here you are. Look at you surmounting that. Give yourselves a pat on the back. That's right. We did that. And we may have had some help. And I hope you did. Lord knows I did. We aren't meant to do this alone. This has been about relationships since Day Zero and before.

So today, do you want to know what I think will bring us peace? Seeing God not as a vending machine, but as a friend. Because a vending machine can't sit and cry with you while you're processing a cancer diagnosis. A vending machine can't reach out to check on you while you're on administrative leave and wondering where you belong. But a friend can, and as the body of Christ, that is our invitation to center our lives on that friend and then to become like that friend.

I can't be everywhere, tries I might. And while it may seem like it sometimes, even Miss Cindy can't be everywhere. Just ask her, she'll tell you. There's a God who is, and God invites each of us to join them wherever we are to reach out to those around us wherever that is. Remember that mandate from Maundy

Thursday that's just a few days away: "A new command I give to you, that you love one another."

Let's take a moment together and hone in on that mandate, that love mandate. So first, close your eyes if you're comfortable. If not, stare me in my face. But if you're comfortable, close them and call to mind a time when you were the recipient of such a love when you were the one who needed a friend and a friend showed up for you. Whether that friend was God or the God in someone else. Now remember that. Remember how that felt? And thank God for that friend or friends, and how they showed up for you in that moment.

Next, let's take a moment to recall a time when you were the one showing up for someone else. Take yourself back to that memory. Remember what that felt like. And recall what that feels like to have the flow of God flowing through you. And lastly, in this final moment, let's ask ourselves who is someone you could reach out to, perhaps even today. I find for myself, the sooner, the higher likelihood of me actually doing it, to send an encouraging text or a card, or call someone on the phone or go for a walk and pray with them. Try to think of someone who you could show up for as a friend today.

And then make a plan to follow through on that. And then, as we all come back together, let's thank God for inviting us into such beautiful work. It's a beautiful thing to be seen, really seen. Being seen by Jesus has changed every one of our lives. And I believe when we look back and see Jesus for who they really are, we reach to pick up palms or whatever we can get our hands on, and lay down our cloaks and our masks and shout Hosanna to the God who really sees us and saves us, every last one of us. Amen.