

We are at the beginning of Holy Week. Today, we heard the Palm Sunday texts, where Jesus makes his entry into Jerusalem for what, we know, will be his final trip. The journey to the cross comes to its completion this week. I invite you to join us for Maundy Thursday. We will have a simple soup supper at 6:00 downstairs in the fellowship hall. Worship will follow at 7:00 here in the sanctuary.

Maundy Thursday is the night we celebrate Jesus' last meal with his disciples. It is also the night when Jesus was betrayed and handed over to the authorities. It is the night that leads to Good Friday. Some of you have asked me what the word "Maundy" means, anyway. (slide one) Maundy is Middle English (slide two) for Commandment. In John's telling of the Last Supper, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (slide three sermon title)

So, the stories of Maundy Thursday are integral to our understanding of Holy Week. If you go from the crowds waving palm branches and then skip straight to Easter, you miss major parts of our story. So, if you cannot attend worship here on Thursday, or somewhere else on Friday, please do read through the passion texts. You can pick your favorite gospel, but I do encourage you to give attention to the whole story.

Okay, end of mini lecture.

We're going to start this morning in the Psalm. This is the Psalm that is quoted by the crowds as Jesus enters Jerusalem—"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

But the connections in the two texts goes much deeper.

These texts are both subversive. They use perfectly acceptable behavior in ways that turn the status quo on its ear. "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever!"

This is language we've grown up hearing, so it doesn't feel particularly subversive to us, perhaps. But gods in antiquity were detached, angry, fearsome, and stern. Gods were not described as either being "good" or as being full of "steadfast love." The Hebrew root of "steadfast love", or "hesed", is the word for a mother's womb. The powerful love that gives and nurtures life.

So, by describing God's love as good, nurturing, steadfast, and eternal, the Psalmist is making a radical claim. And even if we might be familiar with his language choices, don't think that the claim isn't still radical today. We live in a world where people, even people in this very room, live as if they are unloved or unlovable. Or we live as if we believe that God is out there, just waiting to judge and condemn us.

Friends, hear the good news. "O give thanks to the Lord, for God is GOOD; God's steadfast LOVE endures FOREVER!" And in case you didn't hear it in the first verse, the psalmist says, effectively, "repeat after me". In this psalm, the call to thank God for God's good and steadfast love is repeated 5 times!

And the Psalmist doesn't just leave us with that claim. The psalmist reminds his listeners that God has saved in the past and then turns to the future, making claims and requests of God. "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!" In this psalm, thanks and praise and cries for help are all

mixed together in the same breath. This psalm is often sung at Passover, when the Hebrew people remember the formative events of the Exodus story. And the act of remembering the past is not just to remember the 'good ol' days'. We remember the past to create a new and better future. Remembering subverts the world of death and pain in which we often find ourselves by insisting that the God to whom we give our praise and thanks is not done with creation.¹ God has provided help for God's people in the past. And God is the God whose steadfast love endures forever. So, we're called to remember as an act of faith for a future in which God will deliver and save again.

So, when Mark's audience heard the account of the entry into Jerusalem, "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord", they would have heard the connection to Psalm 118. Mark is making a claim about what how God is acting through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever." And Jesus will quote this psalm as well, in chapter 12—the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This entry into Jerusalem, this beginning of our most Holy Week, is bathed in the language of God's saving, steadfast love that endures forever.

I mentioned earlier that both of our texts this morning were radical and subversive. So let's look at Mark's account of the entry into Jerusalem. First, note that he gives us a lot of details about how Jesus orchestrated this event. Why do we care where the colt came from? We care about it because it shows that Jesus planned this entry with great detail.

Tradition claimed that the Messiah would enter into Jerusalem for the final battle for salvation from the Mount of Olives. So Jesus begins his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. But rather than entering on a horse, as a military leader might, or surrounded by an army, as a military leader might, Jesus enters on a colt, a young horse. (Other gospels specify "donkey", but Mark just gives us Jesus on a pony). It is possible that Jesus' feet might have been dragging the ground as he sat on this colt.

Jesus takes all of the traditions of kingship, of messianic deliverance, and honor and turns them upside down.

"You want your deliverance to enter Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives?", he seems to be saying to the crowd, "fine. We can do that. I'll give you pomp and circumstance. My way." But the crowds spread out branches and their cloaks. They run ahead and follow behind, shouting "blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David." They don't seem to see how he is using their expectations to disprove their own expectations.

Yes, Jesus is bringing salvation. Yes, Jesus is bringing back the kingdom of David. But not with power. Not with glory. Not the way the world understands power or glory, at least. And those of us who have been studying Mark's gospel the past few months have seen that those people who follow Jesus can't quite clearly see who he is. They keep bringing their expectations of who they want him to be. And he keeps telling them that their expectations are wrong. But they still don't see. Here, he stops **telling** them they are wrong, and tries to show them. What kind of military leader begins his occupation while riding on a pony? What kind of military leader begins his occupation without soldiers but with crowds of children, outcasts, sinners, and nobodies?

¹ Thanks to Stephen Montgomery for this insight. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 (WJK Press, 2008), p. 149-150.

The emperor can enter Jerusalem with parades. Napoleon can be painted in majesty (slide). Occupying armies can topple statues. (slide). Chinese tanks can roll into Tiananmen Square. (slide) But just as one protester standing up to a tank brought the whole charade of power to a halt, so does Jesus' entry on a colt unmask the charade of power that would tell us that political might and wealth will have the final say.

Because we know how the story will play out. Unlike the crowds waving palm fronds, caught up in seeing Jesus through their preconceptions, we know that he entered the gates of the city to suffer. We know that he entered the gates to die.

And just as we are called to believe that God's steadfast love endures forever, so are we called to believe that we are to follow Jesus through the gates of the city. We enter with him into his radical claim that God is not yet done with this world. We remember the past actions in order to re-member the future. To claim that the suffering and death of this world do not win. That the powers and principalities of this world do not win. It is God's love that endures forever.

So, we enter the gates of the city with Jesus. We find concrete actions that show the world that their preconceptions are wrong. We stand up for the downtrodden. We have solidarity with the outcast. We give our voice to those who have no voice. We invite people to join us in love, rather than out of fear. We care for our environment and our earth as if stewardship is different than domination. We show the world that in this current economic downturn, we help ourselves by helping others.

Following Jesus through the gates of the city involves making a claim. The crowd that Mark describes was making a claim too. Perhaps not the claim Jesus wanted them to make, but a claim nonetheless. By cheering his triumphal entry from the Mt of Olives, by throwing branches and cloaks on the ground as they cheer "Hosanna! Blessed is the coming of the *kingdom* of our ancestor David!", the crowd is being treasonous to the Roman Empire. They were making a claim for God's rule over Caesar's rule. "***Long live the king (of David!)***".

Are you ready to enter through the gates? This week, as we prepare for the celebration of Easter, let us ask God to help us set down our preconceptions. Let us ask God to help us live in confidence of God's steadfast love that endures forever. Let us spend time in the biblical text, preparing our hearts and minds for the good news of Easter that only arrives through the suffering of the cross. Let us pray for the courage to enter through the gates, accompanying our Lord through the final days of his earthly life.

Amen.