

“Will You Follow Jesus?”

Matthew 3:2 & 21:1-11

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April 2, 2023

Prayer for Understanding Holy God, Sometimes it's hard to hear you over the hosannas. Sometimes it's hard to hear you over the noise of city streets. Sometimes it's hard to hear you over our racing thoughts, our mental to-do lists, or our desire to fit in.

Sometimes it is hard to hear you in this noisy world. So just as you stopped traffic in Jerusalem, stop traffic here. Pause the rush. Open the gates. Dwell among us, until your Word is all we can hear. We are listening. We are laying down our cloaks. Amen.

Where are you headed? How has your Lenten seeking changed you? We began our Lenten journey with Jesus' words. **Matthew 3:2 MSG “Change your life. God's kingdom is here.”** The Holy Spirit is within you. Breathe; life, love, peace, joy, creativity, grace, is within you. God is eager to change, redeem, renew, renovate, resurrect you, everyone and the entire cosmos to glorious perfection. So far in this season of Lent how have you changed? What life diminishing aspects have you let go? How have you repented, turned, changed, to life enhancing aspects? God has promised to never leave or forsake us. God has promised to be with us always. God is grace. Every poor choice is forgiven. Every hurt will be healed. Every moment is a fresh start, pure, with endless possibilities for change, goodness, joy, and love.

Where are you headed? The confirmands put their faith into words. Each of us was invited to choose who we would serve. If you reaffirmed your faith to serve God, then you are called to embody the healing love of God for all people. We are all commissioned to love extravagantly.

Where are you headed? Jesus and the woman at the well gave each other water. How do you receive living water? How do you give living water? How are you expanding your imagination of the coming glorious kingdom of God? A majestic world of extravagant love, ceaseless joy, enduring peace, growing abundance, complete wholeness, expanding wonders and vibrant relationships with all people.

Where are you headed? How are you letting go of judgement and growing in grace? How are you moving from, “who's fault is it?” to “how can I help?” How are you letting go of cause-and-affect thinking to healing questions and healing actions?

Where are you headed? There were two parades occurring at once. Jesus' unconventional, and unexpected entry into Jerusalem and Pilate's extravagant, orchestrated procession. As Jesus and Pilate enter the city for the Passover, they embody different directions. Pilate commands military dominance and imperial power; Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God and the way of peace and love. Some of you remember when Pastor Riz dressed up as a donkey to tell of the donkey's perspective carrying Jesus and Pastor David dressed up as a stallion to tell of the stallion's perspective carrying Pilate. Within the chaos and commotion, which leader will you follow?

Today's scripture states that the whole city was in an uproar, stirred up, by Jesus' arrival. A religious scholar asserts: “Jerusalem frozen with religious formalism was stirred by the popular enthusiasm as by a mighty wind or by an earthquake.” Compare the Jesus parade with Pentecost. Similarly, in both stories, pilgrims from different tribes have come to Jerusalem for a festival. At the Jesus parade the crowds ask, “Who is this?” At Pentecost the crowds ask, “What does this mean?” What does it mean to you that the crowds respond to mystery with questions? As we enter Holy Week, what questions are stirring for you?

Imagine you are one of the disciples. You know all the threats mounting against Jesus; you know that the religious leaders are conspiring against him. As Jesus openly enters the city with a public procession, how do you feel?

Imagine you are in the crowd that has chosen the Jesus parade instead of the Pilate parade. The proclamation, “Hosanna,” is a Hebrew imperative that was initially a cry for help, meaning, “Save us!” Over time, it was used liturgically in Psalm 118 as an expression of praise and adoration sung at the Feast of Tabernacles, which was associated with palm branches. The crowd is described as shouting and crying out. Therefore, the tone of the parade is nuanced and complex. Some cry out with desperation. Some shout with adoration and praise. Some are there for the Festival of Passover, participating in the liturgical procession without giving it much thought. Some are threatened,

afraid. Some are seeking forgiveness. Others healing. Some are seeking an abundant life. What form of Hosanna resonates with you? Are shouting, crying out, mumbling, silent or exclaiming?

Matthew 21:1-11 NLT “As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. “Go into the village over there,” Jesus said. “As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will immediately let you take them.” This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said, “Tell the people of Jerusalem, ‘Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey’s colt.’” The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. They brought the donkey and the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over the colt, and Jesus sat on the colt. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of Jesus, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around Jesus were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as Jesus entered. “Who is this?” they asked. And the crowds replied, “It’s Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Probably most of us want to believe if we were there, we would have chosen the Jesus parade. Which parade does your lifestyle, your choices, your views, how you spend your time and money align? Up until this point, Jesus for the most part has avoided religion and politics. Jesus begins Holy Week with a preplanned procession, calls himself “king”, comes to Jerusalem on the high religious holiday of Passover and enters at the same time that Pilate and the military have planned their procession. Is Jesus asking people to make a choice, to determine where they are headed? A choice similar to Joshua and the Israelites. Choose this day who you will serve idols or God. A choice similar to Psalm 1. The people had to choose to attend one parade.

Your work is to seek, to explore, to wrestle, to listen to the Holy Spirit and determine where you are headed? And not just a surface answer. Are you putting your love for all into action? Can everyone see where you are headed by your daily life?

Which parade would you have attended? The well-organized, safe, orderly, militaristic parade of law and order, enforcing the status quo, oppressing some, which drew most of the rich, scholarly, and powerful. Or the chaotic, risky, movement of love, demanding change, equality for all people. The Jesus parade, or one might call it a protest, included people from every segment of the population. There were religious leaders, politicians, rich, powerful, soldiers, tax collectors, foreigners, women, children, people from various religions, poor, outcast, oppressed, lepers, lame, blind, immigrants, refugees, adulterers, orphans, demon possessed, sick, broken, desperate. They screamed Hosanna to praise God and to beg for help, healing, and change.

Jesus and Pilate embody different directions. Scripture asks you to make a choice. Where are you headed? Pastor Lisle Gwynn Garrity writes: “Which parade you would join in Jerusalem has a lot to say about your definition of power. If you are quick to place yourself in the Jesus parade, I encourage you to pause and consider these questions honestly: When have you aligned yourself with systems, or people, who have used their power to uphold the status quo for violence? When have you embodied power through vulnerability and love for your neighbor?”

Jesus was clear from the first day of his ministry. Jesus proclaimed: **Matthew 3:2 MSG** “**Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.**” Jesus’ teachings, parables, healings and lifestyle all proclaimed God’s redeem grace freely offered to all people. Jesus’ love was radical and extreme. Later in the week Jesus would further disrupt the fabric and stability of the world with humble subversion, turning over tables in the temple, challenging power, sitting with sinners, healing the religious impure, his death and resurrection. A perfect extreme love that continues to disrupt the world today and demands change.

Examine your lifestyle how can you follow Jesus instead of empire? There are always exceptions. We are probably a part of the exceptions group. A recent study found that on average as wealth increases, generosity decreases, and as safety increases, compassion for others decrease. As the wealth of a country grows, participation in religion decreases. There is nothing inherently evil about wealth unless one lets their wealth decrease their generosity, compassion, faith, and love for everyone. Wealth can be a tool for tremendous good.

What is your state of being? If one has been sick, grieving, struggling, feels set aside or ignored, or is experiencing powerlessness or marginalization, or oppression or fearful, any glimpse of gaining back some power or security would be welcomed and cheered. The deeper the struggle typically the more vibrant the joy at the promise of some relief. Is this the source of the energy of the Jesus parade? Is that the parade you want to join? To join the Jesus parade does one need to be for all the people that were in the parade with Jesus?

Should the Jesus parade be above all the parades in your life? Every human group, organization, church, political party is broken, flawed and unable to love completely because every one of us is broken, flawed and unable to love completely. The good that politics could do is often distorted by power, control, and money. Jesus humbly rode into Jerusalem, served everyone, and sought to do the will of God. Politics is a tool that can be used for good, however God is the source of all goodness and not politics. On that first Palm Sunday some trusted politics, the roman empire, to create a just society others trusted God.

Pastor and the former moderator of our denomination Bruce Reyes-Chow in discussing where we are headed laments those who are trying to combine the parades and wrote: “I hope that many are resisting the wave of Christian nationalism that has been the dominant Christian narrative in our political discourse. Too many are choosing the narrative of Jesus as a wartime victor and choosing a Gospel militarized against anyone who would stray from a litmus test of beliefs—beliefs that Jesus never actually addressed and beliefs certainly not included in the commandments, that Jesus did speak to us, to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

We begin Holy Week with questions and choices. Are you trying to combine the parades or are you choosing a parade, or are you striving to establish the Jesus parade as the foundation and guide to every aspect of your life? Are you with Jesus tenaciously establishing the Kingdom of God on earth with love?

“Where are you headed?”

A poem by Sarah Speed

We are trains on a track, moving through life at warp speed.

Please keep all arms and legs inside the moving vehicle at all times.

The years pass like a flipbook, faster than we can absorb, but the train does not stop.

We press our faces to the windows to try and get a good view and we ask each other, Where are you headed?

And there on the train we decide—

we want to head toward the promised day.

We want to head toward crowded tables and long, healthy lives.

We want to move in the direction of joyful children, and hopeful communities.

We want to move closer to God with every mile of track,
and that does not happen by accident.

So it's time to ask,

Where are you headed,

and who is driving your train?

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus stood at a crossroads at the outskirts of Jerusalem. Jesus could have chosen a life of safety, of healing many people and loving many people in the countryside. Jesus chose to sacrifice his life for all people, revealing God's love for all people, giving hope to all people, in Jesus' resurrection is a promise that the kingdom of God is continually coming to earth in every act of love. Will you follow Jesus? Amen