

“LAYING DOWN IN ORDER TO STAND”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Palm Sunday

Text: Luke 19:28-40; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a (NLT)

⁴ *The Sovereign LORD has given me his words of wisdom,
so that I know how to comfort the weary.*

*Morning by morning he wakens me
and opens my understanding to his will.*

⁵ *The Sovereign LORD has spoken to me,
and I have listened.*

I have not rebelled or turned away.

⁶ *I offered my back to those who beat me
and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard.*

*I did not hide my face
from mockery and spitting.*

⁷ *Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.*

*Therefore, I have set my face like a stone,
determined to do his will.*

And I know that I will not be put to shame.

⁸ *He who gives me justice is near.*

Who will dare to bring charges against me now?

Where are my accusers?

Let them appear!

⁹ *See, the Sovereign LORD is on my side!*

Who will declare me guilty?

Philippians 2:5-11 (NLT)

⁵ *You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.*

⁶ *Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.*

⁷ *Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.*

*When he appeared in human form,
8 he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.
9 Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

How are you doing on your wilderness journey? Is it truly a wilderness journey for you like it is for me? For some of you, I would gather that it might be incredibly difficult to do social distancing and stay at home. If you deal with depression, or anxiety or any other issue like that, I'm sure that isolation is not good for you. Take a walk, call a friend, or call your pastor. Know that there are ways to be safe in your home and not be alone. If you need any of those resources, please feel free to call or text. We would certainly be glad to help.

Just remember, we are going THROUGH the wilderness. We are on a JOURNEY. We are not stopping. We are not putting up a mailbox! –as Pastor Mike would say. Hopefully, as we get to Easter, our souls will be lifted a bit as we know and claim that God is surely alive!

If you are like me, I'm so looking forward to Easter! I'm so looking forward to an empty tomb! I'm so looking forward to hearing that God has kept God's promises! Even in the midst of chaos! Even in the midst of fear! Even in the midst of isolation—God has not forgotten us! Matter of fact, God is with us—in our homes, in our hospitals, in our grocery stores—everywhere we find ourselves, and even everywhere we are not—God is there! This is the message that I'm excited about. This is the message that will get me through a few more weeks of isolation and social distancing and sheltering at home.

But in the meantime, let's turn our attention today to Palm Sunday...

We emerge this week from our wilderness wanderings and find ourselves caught up in a parade, a party, a procession of palms! It has been a *long* journey to arrive at the gates of Jerusalem where Jesus will make his grand entry into the heart of political power and religious authority. We have not arrived here by chance. We have spent a considerable time remembering who we are and whose we are. We have spent weeks returning our hearts to the Heart of All Hearts.

As pilgrims on this Lenten journey, we have devoted the last five weeks to intentionally imitating Christ, repenting, coming together, and embracing the new thing that God is already doing within us and among us. It has been a season of turning our hearts to the One whose promises are bigger than the stars; a season of fasting from the things that harm, while feasting on grace. It we have walked the pathway in purposeful prayer and self-reflection, we discover that the very landscape of our hearts has been turned and cultivated. What was once a rocky desert is beginning to blossom with new and tender shoots. This season has hopefully reshaped our aching and broken hearts. The entire

journey up until this point is what has prepared us—and our hearts—to enter these final days of Lent, to walk with Jesus, to remember his final days on earth, to endure the heartache and horror of death.

Jesus determinedly “set his face” toward Jerusalem in Luke 9:51, and the time has now come to enter the city. We remember that Luke’s Gospel opened in Jerusalem with Zechariah ministering in the temple and with the infant Jesus blessed there by Simeon and Anna. Luke has already put on their lips that Jesus is the one who will bring salvation, and it’s Anna who added that he will redeem Jerusalem (2:31, 38). The drama of the Passion is a bookend in this gospel that, at long last, brings Jesus and the Holy City together again.

If you need an incredible story to read, read the Gospel of Luke from cover to cover. And see how it connects for yourself.

As the Jewish people filled the city to remember God’s liberative act of delivering the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, tension and anticipation would have been thick in the air. As Roman imperialism crushed and oppressed God’s people, Pilate made the trip into town to uphold law and order. Pilate must have entered the city in a procession of pomp complete with war horses and an armored army.

Here these words from Luke 19:28-40 NLT.

²⁸ After telling this story, Jesus went on toward Jerusalem, walking ahead of his disciples. ²⁹ As he came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two disciples ahead. ³⁰ “Go into that village over there,” he told them. “As you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks, ‘Why are you untying that colt?’ just say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

³² So they went and found the colt, just as Jesus had said. ³³ And sure enough, as they were untying it, the owners asked them, “Why are you untying that colt?”

³⁴ And the disciples simply replied, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ So they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it for him to ride on.

³⁶ As he rode along, the crowds spread out their garments on the road ahead of him. ³⁷ When he reached the place where the road started down the Mount of Olives, all of his followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen.

³⁸ “Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the LORD!

Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!”

³⁹ But some of the Pharisees among the crowd said, “Teacher, rebuke your followers for saying things like that!”

⁴⁰ He replied, “If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!”

In stark contrast to this display of military might, Jesus arrives just before Passover feast and curiously instructs two disciples to borrow a colt for him to ride. When its owners ask the two what they are doing, they answer as Jesus told them to: *“The Lord needs it.”* Jesus has need of each one of us, just as he had need of the colt. The questions then, on this Palm Sunday are: “Are we ready to carry the weight of the gospel beyond the parade into the rough places where darkness and death overwhelm? Will we carry the good news to the oppressed and those whose hearts are in need of binding up, even if it means putting ourselves in danger?”

After a cloak is spread over the colt and more are laid on the road, the simple parade begins. It's a procession of humility and gentleness. It's a demonstration of meekness and vulnerability. Instead of a big show of military might, Jesus defies expectations and comes in a different way. He doesn't rally the crowds to incite revolt. His coming invites in them the response of, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven" (Luke 19:38). As we hear an echo of the song of both the angels and Simeon from Luke 2, we have to rethink what kind of king is being blessed here: one who comes ultimately to bring about God's peace.

By now we know that there's something missing from this parade as Luke tells it...palms. Instead of waving signs of victory, of paradise, of the fertile ground of new life, Luke emphasizes instead the act of spreading cloaks on the ground. Here we have an act of deep reverence and subservience. As we in our homes are lifting up and waving our palm branches, maybe there is a complementary action of laying down that needs to occur.

As we lift up our shouts of praise on this Palm Sunday, maybe we also need to lay down our ways of living that do not honor God, our neighbor, and all life around us. As we lift up our voices crying out for an end to injustice and suffering, maybe we also need to lay down our lives, allowing Christ to fill them with humility and the new beginnings of hope. As we lift up our palms with songs to bless the One who comes in peace, maybe we also need to lay down the superficial cries of victory and triumph. As we lift up our eyes to see a vision of earth and heaven made one, maybe we also need to lay down our expectations of how God will change us and our world; of how God will come into our lives to accomplish this. As we lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, maybe we also need to lay down our hearts until they burn with the desires of God's heart. And in our lifting up and our laying down, God might just weave us into a tapestry of resurrection.

The triumphant parade with shouts of joy and blessing will cause our hearts to rise and swell to the highest of highs. The excitement of the boisterous parade where Jesus is accepted by the crowds will fade, and our hearts will slip to the depths of despair, and Jesus is rejected. Holy Week brings us to a space and a time for lament, for struggle, for sorrow. Time slows, and we will walk through betrayal and unanswered prayer into darkness and death. We have done the work to prepare our hearts to walk from the procession to the table, from the cross to the stone-cold tomb.

Today, as we celebrate Love Incarnate who came to live, and work, and dance among us, maybe we are the borrowed colt. Maybe we need to lay down our coats to line the way. The story continues, and we have prepared our feet to follow its path with a hope that is stronger than despair, a light that is stronger than darkness, and a love that is stronger than death.

Friends, hope is still alive—even as we enter Holy Week! And as Scripture reminds us...hope will not disappoint! Stay strong, my friends. Stay hopeful! We serve a God who will surely see us through! Peace to you! Amen!