

Friends, I'm not going to mince words. We're going to jump right in. At the tail end of the gospel text we hear a horrible prediction by Jesus on the fate of the city of Jerusalem. And indeed in the eighth decade of the first century, Jerusalem was wholly decimated by the Romans. Luke's gospel was written after that so it is not as bold a "prediction" as we might think. But nonetheless, Jesus' grief is real. This, from our bible study curriculum:

The historian Josephus gives a horrifying vivid account of the city's siege by the Romans, who surrounded it with earthworks to seal it off. Food became so scarce that people stole from their own families and ate their own infant children. When the city was finally captured, the Romans did indeed raze almost all of the city to the ground. Luke's original audience were aware of the destruction (which was a past event for them) and must have heard Jesus' words with great emotion. (*Living the Word, Contexts & Connections #3-28, "History"*)

The city that represented the seat of Judaism, was ruined - YHWH's people in ashes.

There's an interesting parallel to what happened to the city of Jerusalem and what happens during this week we begin commemorating today; for those who gave themselves to the Jesus Movement. By Friday, the one they have come to believe as the locus of the holy will be dead and buried. Jesus' body takes on the same amount of abuse and cruelty as will the city some 40 years later.

For those who lived through the one (Jesus' death), and then faced the other (the destruction of Jerusalem), perhaps they found strength in the blessings given to them by Jesus. They must have, as did those in subsequent generations who have faced injustice at the hands of other oppressive systems, because these stories contain power for us even today.

I suspect the people of Jerusalem never thought it would "get that bad." Sure, the religious leaders cowed to the Roman dictatorship. Sure, extra taxes had to be paid, and certain religious freedoms given up. Yeah, okay having public cruciform executions as the main deterrent from wavering against the *Pax Romana* was foreboding. Even the beheading of John the Baptizer could be rationalized as more the work of an imbalanced, sexually-obsessed narcissist, than a harbinger of destruction to the entire city. But seeing the capital burned to the ground was never a realistic option in their minds. But Jesus understood. God understands.

Sorry, there's no singing or palm waving in the sermon today. Our country has been through too much this year. We've seen our own Capitol besieged - by our own people. We've seen COVID-19 eat away at our population in heart-breakingly high numbers. We've watched as people have chosen to turn a blind eye to their neighbor because following public health protocols is an inconvenience. No, we're not singing or waving palms this year, because the death and tyranny that have always been at the heart of this story are very real to more of us than usual this year. In many ways, we've

already seen the betrayal of Maundy Thursday. With the mass shootings of the past two weeks we've witnessed the horror of Good Friday. We're even exhausted from being left out of our houses of worship going on two Holy Weeks now. Waiting in the tomb, we understand. We have no time nor patience for fanfare.

I suppose it is fitting that we are reading Luke's narrative this year. Please go back and reread it. So much of what we place in the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is absent in this story. For one, the entire thing takes place OUTSIDE of the city - on the Mount of Olives. It is here that we begin to make references back to the Hebrew Scriptures, and particularly the prophets. Again, from our curriculum material:

The Mount of Olives is mentioned by many Hebrew Bible prophets, especially Zechariah, who says it is the place where the Lord will fight a final battle against the nations of the world (Zechariah 14:1-21). Ezekiel states that God will return to Jerusalem from the east, presumably over the Mount of Olives. (Ibid, "Culture/Religion")

Also, while Jesus does prepare to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, there are no palms and the only crowd that is shouting encouragement are Jesus' disciples. It makes me think *they had a good understanding* of what was prophesied by Zechariah:

37 As Jesus approached the road leading down from the Mount of Olives, the whole throng of his disciples began rejoicing. They praised God with a loud voice because of all the mighty things they had seen.

...

39 Some of the Pharisees from the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, scold your disciples! Tell them to stop!”

No throngs of Jerusalemites - only those who were accompanying Jesus excited about what his entry into the city could mean.

Luke does not mention cries of “Hosanna,” references to David or David’s throne, or the waving of palm branches. (Ibid, “Authorial Intention/Occasion”)

Instead, I want us to focus our gaze on the same place as Luke - on the words that are being spoken as Jesus rides on. Luke takes a line from Psalm 118 (verse 26, *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*) and tailors it for this occasion (19:38, *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*). Our curriculum states that Luke works hard to downplay any political implications in Jesus’ procession. I’m not sure that substituting the word “king” for “one” is exactly being subtle about who Jesus’ followers thought had the real authority in those parts. But in the fullness of the context, Jesus’ “kingship” wasn’t OVER people. What they would come to see is that Jesus was Lord (another important semantic change) of life and death. Jesus surprised everyone by reimagining Zechariah’s “final battle” to be victory over the tyranny of death itself, rather than any tyrannical governments. Jesus knew he couldn’t save the fate of the city (and therefore the people of God) - thus, he weeps. But he could--and would--show everyone that death did not defeat life with God.

We've heard these words from Jesus' mouth once before in Luke's gospel. Maybe some of you recall back in chapter 13 when Jesus was teaching near Jerusalem and some Pharisees came out to warn him of Herod's desire to kill Jesus, and that he should flee in order to live. This passage is our first look into Jesus' grief for Jerusalem. He names it as a dying place for prophets and says,

34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ...(h)ow often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that. 35 Look, your house is abandoned. I tell you, you won't see me until the time comes when you say, *Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name.*"

He has returned, and the psalm is being recited. But, I'm not sure the city was even still ready to see him. From today's text, verse 42, again "Jesus wept over (Jerusalem), and said, 'If only you knew on this of all days the things that lead to peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes.'..." and he goes on to pronounce the misery that will befall the city. Really, in their blindness, misery has already befallen the city; ergo Jesus' crucifixion.

So, on this first day of Holy Week, as we prepare to enter Jerusalem with Jesus, let us block out the typical noise, and let us reach into the text, and let us find the key that will unlock the "things that lead to peace" and help us to see clearly.

First of all, as we began this service, we must call ourselves into Brave Space. I think we know what I'm about to say--but Holy Week just emphasizes it all

the more--**Following Jesus is NOT for the faint of heart.** We have to understand that claiming life as Christian doesn't mean that it will be any easier than anyone else's life - you all know all too well how difficult LIFE is. We must be realistic and see life as it is, and, as Jesus, have compassion for it.

Secondly, we must choose to see. Several of the stories Jesus tells just ahead of his arrival at Jerusalem have to do with employing "Faith over Fear." (Yes, Pat Baker, I heard you!) Those who are willing to step out and claim their desire to have Jesus see them fully for who they are, are the ones commended by Jesus. He tells a parable of a tax collector who boldly declares to God, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," set against a religious leader who thanks God that he's not like *those other (sinful) people* - forgetting to take a harder look in the mirror of the soul. Jesus exclaims that "those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (18:13-15)

Not long after his disciples are unable to "see," that is, understand his proclamation that he is to undergo suffering and be killed at the hands of the Romans, he is approached by a blind beggar, who, echoing the tax collector of the earlier story, asks Jesus to "have pity on me." Jesus asks him "What he wants Jesus to do for him," and he replied, "Rabbi, I want to see." Jesus said to him, "'Receive your sight! Your faith has healed you.' At once the person was able to see, and began to follow Jesus, praising God." (18:34ff)

Herein lies the key, my co-followers of Jesus. We must liken ourselves to the tax collector and the blind person and ask God to be merciful to us in our humanity. Luke's gospel begins by introducing us to John the Baptizer before he was even conceived letting us know that the crux of the gospel is about **repentance** - about constantly seeking new life with God, and that is to be found through the teaching, healing, and mercy of Jesus. While so much in the world is about power and politics and accumulation and keeping up with the Jones', our humility gets lost.

But when we call on the name of our God - consistently and constantly - we retain our balance - we remember our call to love God and neighbor as we love ourselves, we greet the world from a place of compassion, and, then we find ourselves blessed. For goodness sakes look how Jesus--Jesus, God incarnate!--approached the city, again living into the words of the prophet Zechariah, "humble and riding on 'a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" (9:9)

Give yourselves into this week. Journey the full distance with Jesus - and recognize how Jesus is also journeying with you. If you are able to come to the church, participate in the prayer stations that have been set up--not just by Colleen and me, but also by some of your peers in the congregation, those who are on this journey with you--to, perhaps, help midwife the movement from death into life. Invite the Holy Spirit to do it's work as we call upon the name of our God.

So, just as Jesus was serenaded by his disciples as he prepared to enter Jerusalem, so we ought to hear their call to each of us:

Blessed is she, who comes in the name of our God.

Blessed is he, who comes in the name of our God.

Blessed are they, who comes in the name of our God.

Blessed are you, who comes in the name of our God.

Blessed are we when we enter life's struggles in the name of our God.

Be humble...but be brave...and be blessed no matter where this journey takes you.