

The Pilgrim Way: The End, or the Beginning?

Matthew 21:1-11

Hebrews 2:5-9

Matthew 21:1-11

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'

⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ 'Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey,

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed 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!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil (**the other time Jerus. was abuzz like this: Jesus' birth—Matt.2:3; Jesus has a habit of stirring up Jerusalem**), asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Hebrews 2:5-9

⁵Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. ⁶But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? ⁷You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, ⁸subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with

glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Well, our pilgrim journey has brought us to Jerusalem, for the feast of the Passover. Try to picture this in your mind: imagine large crowds, bustling with energy and anticipation. The city has at least doubled in population, like a small college town on a football Saturday. People are shopping at open markets and bazaars and cooking food in open fires.

The enormous and expansive well-adorned temple on top of the hill is crowded with pilgrims who are sharing the stories of their journeys, and purchasing the needed supplies and sacrifices for their observances that week.

The Roman governor Pontius Pilate has arrived in town, in a military parade that would make Kim Jong Un jealous, with prancing stallions and chariots and at least two hundred Roman soldiers in tow, in full battle regalia, as a show of force, to keep the peace. Herod the appointed ruler over the Jews has also come to town with an entourage of religious functionaries as a display of his own sort of power and of his role as “King of the Jews” (that phrase is in quotes, because he isn’t really a king; only a puppet leader appointed by Rome). Neither Pontius Pilate nor Herod actually lived in Jerusalem; they only came to the city once a

year during the Passover to try to control the mob of people and prevent any possible uprisings.

And into this setting comes Jesus, riding on a *donkey*, with people waving palm branches and laying their coats on the road ahead of him (which was typically a sign of a coming revolt), as they were shouting “Hosanna!” It’s almost comical, this rag-tag assembly, in contrast to the other processions. Jesus has brought his followers with him, but half the crowd or more doesn’t even know who he is. That’s why people ask, “Who is he??” It’s almost funny; they’re participating and shouting “Hosanna!” and somebody turns to the person next to them and says, “Um, by the way, what’s going on here? *Who* is this? Who are we welcoming??” There were just people in Jerusalem who saw folks running toward a street to welcome *somebody*, and they just joined in. Kind of like a flash mob. “I have no idea what’s going on, but... why not?!? Could be fun.” (pause)

Welcome to Palm Sunday! Welcome to Jerusalem. Welcome to the beginning of Holy Week. When we get to Holy Week in the bible, all 4 gospels slow down, rather than speed up. When it comes to Jesus’ last week, the pace slows, even if the drama intensifies. And, we see a different side to Jesus in Jerusalem. Someone from the crowd answers the “Who is he?” question by

saying, "This is Jesus, the *prophet*." He hasn't been called that up to this point, with one exception where he obliquely referred to himself that way as he began his public ministry. He has spoken and acted in a prophetic way from time to time over three years, but now, in Jerusalem, he wears the mantle fully. Prophet.

This is a tense week. On his way into Jerusalem, Jesus curses a fig tree. That's an ominous start. Then, upon entering the city, he goes straight to the temple and overturns the money changers' tables. That says something about this week too, and the tension that Jesus creates right from the start. He doesn't go straight to Herod, or to Pontius Pilate, and give them the business. Nor does he go straightaway to the poor, or to heal the sick, like he so often did up until now. He goes to the temple first, the heart of Israel's religion. The center of their faith. And he goes, not to teach, initially, but to clean house. A little spring cleaning, as he turns over the tables of the money changers.

Why does he do that? Because people had to buy grain and wheat and animals and birds and kosher food and various required items for their Passover worship and offerings, so they brought currency from where they came, to exchange for temple currency (the temple had a different monetary system).

And the local temple money changers charged enormous fees and gave terrible exchange rates so they could profit from what the law required. Kind of like religious payday loan deals. This is what made Jesus mad; they had turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers, as Jesus put it.

During the week, Jesus spends every night, along with his disciples, in the town of Bethany, a two mile walk from Jerusalem. So every morning he and his disciples walk in, and every evening they return to Bethany (to their air B & B for the week, so to speak).

During the daytime Jesus teaches in the temple, and he tells his most tense parables about preparedness for the coming persecutions, parables and stories about things like sheep and goats and judgment and wicked tenants who mismanage the owner's property. He delivers his "woe to you, scribes and Pharisees" sermon, denounces the Sadducees, and gets into heated arguments with the priests and the pharisees and the Sadducees more than he previously had. And because of their common hatred of him, priests, Pharisees and Sadducees, along with Herod's people, who previously hated *each other*, have now found a common enemy, so they band together to conspire against Jesus.

In the middle of the week Jesus laments over Jerusalem. Literally weeps over the city, the way the prophet Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations, as Jesus sees the coming downfall of the city and the destruction of the temple. And in the evenings Jesus interprets for his disciples what is taking place, and teaches them.

And of course, on the night of the Passover meal, Jesus gathers his disciples in the upper room to observe the feast, with a new interpretation of its meaning for them, a new covenant that he is establishing in himself. Jesus then washes their feet and instructs them to do likewise and to be servants in the world; and above all else, to love as he has loved.

He then leaves them his final words of instruction and encouragement, as told in John's gospel chapters 14-17, which include some of our favorite sayings of Jesus; for example, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid." And then he prays for them, and for us. And following their dinner, they go out, and Jesus, at his most human, prays with anguish and with drops of blood, consenting to his Father's will, setting aside his own. He is then betrayed, arrested, tried before both the civil

authorities and the religious authorities, and then executed, at the behest of the same crowd that gathered to regale him at the beginning of the week.

As we reflect on the events of this Holy Week, I'd like to make two observations that I hope might bring focus to our reflections—our reflections on Jesus, and our reflections on our lives, as we complete the Lenten journey.

First: Jesus is in control. When I say control, I mean, he knows what he is doing. He is resolute. He trusts his father so much that he maintains resolve.

Jesus is in control:

- Though he knows the hearts of the crowd, that shouts of “Hosanna!” on Sunday will turn to shouts of “crucify him!” on Friday;
- When groups are conspiring to test him, and then to have him arrested and tried, he remains in control and trust;
- As Jesus prays in the garden, “Not my will, but yours be done;” he shows his trust that the Father’s love for him and for the world is bigger than his suffering, intense as it was;
- Though he seems like a helpless victim as he is betrayed, arrested, falsely accused and tried, he maintains his resolve and does not lose control. He is the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah in 53:7: “like a sheep before it’s

shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Though silent before his accusers, Jesus is in control; he trusts the Father’s plan;

- Jesus is in control as Pontius Pilate sentences him, and then washes his hands of him;
- As his disciples scatter and deny him;
- As he is stripped naked, beaten, and a crown of thorns is pressed upon his head and ruthlessly mocked;
- And finally on the cross, mysteriously, Jesus remains in control as he pronounces forgiveness on a man being crucified alongside him, and as he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” —the only time recorded in the gospels when Jesus uses the distant and formal word “God” in his prayers, rather than the personal and familial word, “Abba, Father.”

He remains in control. He is the one of great resolve, spoken of again in the prophet Isaiah (50:5-7): “The sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.”

Do you hear the resolve, the determination in the face of intense pressure?

And the trust in the Lord? Jesus is in control. That's the first observation.

Second observation: we are *not* in control. All of the people in this drama, especially the ones who thought they were in control, are not.

- The crowds can't control who Jesus is and what he does. Many who gathered on Sunday for his parade into town had hoped that he would overthrow the Roman government; their waving of palm branches was an expression of that, as that type of action is typically reserved for someone who has come to lead a revolt. Many hoped that he would overthrow the corrupt temple priesthood. But he didn't do either of these, and it became a disappointment to many of the people. A great precursor example of this is in John 6:15: after feeding the 5,000, and the people are super-impressed with him, John tells us: "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him *by force* and make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." By force! They created "Jesus 2020" signs and announced his candidacy for him and tried to push him into public office. But Jesus pulled a swift disappearing act. The people can't control him.

- The religious leaders aren't in control. They try to trap Jesus in his teaching several times during the week, unsuccessfully, and when he heals people in the temple they tried to stop him, but can't. So they conspire with Herod's people, and the priests, and the Sadducees and the Pharisees, to do him in.
- The disciples very clearly are not in control. Even after three years with Jesus, watching his ministry, listening to his teaching, receiving his grace (and his occasional rebuke) they all bail out on him when they see that he is not headed toward becoming prime minister of Israel, but is headed toward death.
- Pontius Pilate is not in control, though he might *appear* the most in control of anyone because of his position of authority. He finds Jesus a bit slippery and mysterious. He seems to want to help Jesus, and gives a little effort on his behalf, but in a memorable act of great weakness he gives in to the desires of the people to release Barabbas, and have Jesus executed. And then symbolically washes his hands of him and walks away.
- As Jesus is on the cross, those who put him there and are mocking him are not in control. The bully always thinks he is in charge, but only the one who knows who he or she is, and restrains him or herself, is truly in control.

Holy Week says: we are not in charge. We are not in control, in the big picture of things. And, we are not in charge of Jesus. That might be a good question for each of us to reflect on this week: Do I try to make Jesus into something or someone he is not? Am I trying to pray him into something, or will him to do something that he did not come to do? Maybe we ask the question that was asked on this day by the crowd: "*Who is he??*"

While we are not in charge, the good news, of course, is that Jesus is. Even when things are tense; when things are anxious; when Jesus appears to be weak and it seems as though he doesn't know what he's doing; when we fail: none of this affects that Jesus remains faithfully at his post as Lord, and God, keeping watch (as it affirms in Psalm 121!), holding all of human life, and human death, and human history, and all nations, in his hands.

I love how the writer of Hebrews puts it, from our reading today: we don't see things in subjection to us, as we should. In other words, let's be honest, we're not in control! But... *we do see Jesus!* We see Jesus.

We are not in control like we think we are, or should be, and this covid19 virus is teaching us a big lesson in that, isn't it? But we see Jesus, who is bigger than a pandemic, who is bigger than an economic crisis, bigger than

unemployment, bigger than our boredom at home, bigger than the process of how long it takes for things to get better. That's why I gave us the Lenten prayer of reflection in our order of worship for today on the slow work of God, and patient trust.

Because when it appears that Jesus is weak, or has abandoned all hope, he actually and objectively remains in charge. Here is a great line from the book of Revelation. Revelation is one of my favorite books, difficult to understand in places because of the apocalyptic imagery and references, but once you get past those it's a beautiful and simple message of encouragement to God's saints who are suffering. And, a lot of it *is* easy to understand, and here is one of those places: Rev. 4:2: the apostle John says, "And I looked, and there in heaven stood a throne... *with one seated on the throne!*"

I don't want to read the rest of what it says, because I just want us to take in the good news that: *the throne isn't empty!* John didn't say, "I saw a throne, but couldn't find anyone around who is in charge up here." Jesus is still on the throne. And if I could summarize the entire book of Revelation, this would be a pretty good summary: Jesus the Christ has not abandoned us. We... see... Jesus.

Even in death, Jesus is in control. Jesus' disciples, in spite of his clear teaching and explanation of what would happen in Jerusalem (three times he had told them that he was on his way there to suffer and die), even then they didn't want him, or expect him to die while in Jerusalem. But he did. And thank God for that, not only for the sake of our salvation, but also because Jesus shows that death is a real human experience, and, it is not to be feared. It can be embraced with courage, and with hope, because death is not the last word.

We began the season of Lent with an acknowledgement of our mortality, on Ash Wednesday: from dust you came, to dust you shall return. This week brings us to the fulfillment of that acknowledgement and of our reflection on our own lives as we walk with Jesus that pilgrim pathway to the very end.

As we think of a literal pilgrimage with a leader who walks in front of us, guiding us along the way, think of Jesus, the human Jesus, going before us—not only into life, but also into death.

“We see Jesus,” the writer says, “who was made a little lower than the angels (in other words, human, just like us—what good news that is!) “and is now crowned with glory and honor, the writer says, *because he suffered death.*”

Because he suffered death. Not crowned with glory and honor because he solved all of the world's problems and there is nothing wrong any more. Not crowned with glory and honor because he got rid of all bad people. Not crowned with glory and honor because he snapped his fingers and took coronavirus away and now we don't have a care in the world. Not even because he was raised from the dead. That's what I think it should say, if I were reading this for the very first time. I want it to say that Jesus is crowned with glory and honor because he was resurrected to life at Easter. But it doesn't say that.

It says "crowned with glory and honor *because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*"

We see Jesus. Jesus is one of us. He knows us and understands us, and all of our human experiences during life. *And* he experiences even the **most human** of experiences, and many people's greatest fear: death. Think of it, think of all of Jesus' experiences as a human, that you also may have experienced: growing up in a divided and conflicted culture (check); loneliness (check); betrayal by someone close to him (check); depression (check); trying to have a decent conversation with people who think differently than him, and getting nowhere

(check!); physical abuse (check); and, he experienced death. And a most painful death at that. No hospice or palliative care for Jesus.

What it tells us is that we have hope. Jesus is still on his throne, his is still in charge, he is not fazed by anything, not even death.

So as we wrap up this series, this pilgrim journey, we ask: does the pilgrim journey end in death? Is that our final destination? No! It wasn't Jesus' final destination, nor is it ours. Our final resting place, wherever that may be, is not the end of our journey. We await resurrection. Eternal life. The journey *continues!*

There is a poignant, short scene toward the end of the Lord of the Rings trilogy (3rd book/movie). LOR is a fantasy story, a classic good vs. evil saga. It involves elves and dwarves and humans, and halflings called hobbits, evil sorcerers and terrible creatures called orcs, and a wise and benevolent old wizard named Gandalf, who we might say is the Christ figure in the tale.

When a fortified city called Minas Tirith is under siege and has been breached by disgusting malevolent orcs from the smoldering city of Mordor, and it looks like they and all evil are about to overwhelm the city and kill everyone, thus rendering all human life extinct, one of the young hobbits named Pippin,

who is with Gandalf in one of the upper ramparts, says to Gandalf, "I didn't think it would end this way." Gandalf turns and looks at him with a curious but calm and caring countenance and says:

"End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it. White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise."

Death is not the end. It is a beginning. We need not fear death. We only need to fear being afraid. Jesus goes before us, confidently and with resolve into Jerusalem, into death, into Life.

Please pray with me: Lord Jesus, we thank you for your strength and resolve that show us your great trust of our Father, and your great love for the world. By your Holy Spirit strengthen us as we walk with you this Holy Week. Grant us that same strength, that same trust, and a hope that beyond all of the events and struggles of our time, we can know that you are working your purposes out. Through Christ who died, and who was raised to life. Amen.