

**SERMON TITLE:** “Journeying with Jesus to the Dark Places”

**TEXT:** Matthew 26:1-5; 47-56

**PREACHED AT:** Killarney Park Church, Vancouver, BC

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Today is Palm Sunday. It’s a day where we typically remember, celebrate, and enjoy Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Hosanna! – we celebrate – blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Sometimes we wave palm branches and sing songs; we imagine ourselves among the crowds in Jerusalem who had witnessed his miracles, heard his teaching, been moved by his compassion and grace; we marvel in wonderment at the triumphant Jesus, the King of Creation, the Incarnate God of the Universe entering the holy city on a *donkey*, of all things, in fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9. Like the crowds on that day, we are stirred. Like them, we wonder who this Jesus is, what a strange, beautiful, gentle, and humble king. We know that this “triumphal” entrance is the entrance of a very different kind of king, a king who, in a few short days, would demonstrate that his was a kingship like no other.

Today is Palm Sunday, but I’m not going to be speaking about Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. As you’ve probably noticed, there is nothing very triumphant or uplifting about the passages which are the object of our focus this morning. As we saw last week, Jesus is a very different sort of king than Israel – or any of us, really – expected, one who inverts, disorients, and reorients our conceptions of who God is and what he is doing in, through, and for his world. At Christmas time we sing that “the hopes and fears of all the years were met in a tiny stable in Bethlehem, but here, at the beginning of Holy Week, we are reminded that there is more to the story than God simply coming to *be* among us. We know that the beauty of the scene which marked his arrival will now be marred by the circumstances of his final days.

“The hopes” part of the Christmas song we are familiar with, but what about the “fears?” What “fears” are met when God comes to be among us? How are they met? What role does fear play in the story we’ve heard read this morning, and the story of Easter in general? Perhaps most importantly, what can we learn about fear?

Earlier in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has told us that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven we must receive it as children. On the one hand, of course, children are afraid of many things – monsters under the bed, nasty dreams, bullies at school and many more things to be sure. But on the other hand, children are *not* afraid when they are with someone who they can trust, someone they are convinced is stronger than the things that frighten them.

Just the other day, I was walking with the kids at night to Claire’s ballet class. It’s about a fifteen minute walk from our house, and prior to the time change, it was a journey that took place in the dark both ways. On one of these journeys, Claire said that even though she was scared to walk in the dark, *she wasn’t scared when she walked with me*. Undoubtedly, she is convinced that her dad is strong enough to protect her from whatever

the darkness might hold, but I think that even she knows that dads can't *always* protect their kids from *everything*. I think that her lack of fear was also due to the simple fact that she knew that her dad had walked in the dark before, that it wasn't his first time, and that he knew what to expect. I think that her comfort was due, at least in part, to the fact that she trusted her dad, and that she knew her dad had faced the darkness before her.

Returning to our text, we also see fear.

It is evident throughout the passages we just heard read – and we'll get to that; however, perhaps the most obvious example comes right at the end. The disciples, despite all of the warnings and teaching Jesus had provided about the nature of his mission, how he was the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, about how through his suffering God's plan of salvation would be carried forward, simply flee.

Donald Senior, commenting on this passage, memorably says that “the disciples fall prey to the terror of the Passion” I wonder if we, too, fall prey to the fear and ambiguity that is inherent in following Christ in a world which still knows of his absence as well as his presence. Jesus did not make things easy for the nation of Israel – he was not what they expected in so many ways, and their response was, ultimately, one of violence, fear, and the desperate clinging to control. Are we much different? In a sense, of course, Jesus does “make things easier” for us; we are convinced that in him God is most fully revealed (Col. 1:19), that Christ is the clue to history, that redemption – whether of our own personal stories or of the grand cosmic story – is to be found in him alone. We know more of the story than those first disciples, after all. We believe that God, in Christ, entered the darkness of the human condition and *defeated* it, and that because of this our future is, ultimately, one which will be characterized by *light* and *life*.

Yet in another sense, of course, Jesus doesn't make things any easier for us than for the first disciples. Like them, we await the kingdom of God in its fullness; like them, we find Jesus simultaneously beautifully compelling and baffling; like them, we yearn for divine vindication, for a show of strength, for the defeat of evil and death that we have only a foretaste of now. Like them, we can't really understand how God's defeat of the darkness can possibly be accomplished through the events that we know will follow Palm Sunday.

And like them, we are afraid. We're afraid of the usual things, of course; we're afraid of what the future might hold for us and those we care about, we're unsettled by the instability of so many areas of the planet, we're anxious about the consequences of a culture that is consuming resources at an unsustainable rate, we're afraid of getting sick, losing our jobs, of not being able to find jobs, of failing to meet the expectations of others, of letting those close to us down, of the rapid pace of change in our hyper-technological society, about the erosion of familiar institutional structures... And ultimately, of course, we're afraid of death.

We're afraid of all these things and more, to varying degrees, but we're also, I think afraid of God. Of course the fear of the Lord is, on one level, an appropriate and proper

thing. God is God, and we are not; it is proper for us to revere him, to acknowledge our creaturely status before him, to recognize his right and his obligation to hold us to account. But perhaps we're also afraid of God because he's unpredictable and we're never quite sure what to expect from him. He doesn't do our bidding, he doesn't automatically smooth our paths; indeed, just a few chapters earlier, in Matthew 16:24, Jesus says that a life of discipleship will involve suffering, and dying to self! An indisputable component of the Christian story is that when God comes to his people, he comes in a way that provokes division, conflict, confusion, and fear.

The events in and around Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, his arrest, and ultimately, his crucifixion provoked all of these reactions. So what do *we* do when we are afraid? What are our instinctual responses when *we* are disoriented, confused, and frightened? I know what I do – I try to grasp for whatever control I can find, and cling for dear life to what I think I can be certain of.

Right now, as many of you know, I am nearing the end of my studies, and our family is facing some difficult decisions regarding what comes next for us. Where will we be sent from this community? What will we do? Does God have a plan? Can we know that plan? It is a hopeful and exciting time, but it can also be disorienting and confusing. There is fear involved – fear of the unknown, fear of having to say goodbye to new friends, and a whole host of other things. And my default position, when I start to feel overwhelmed by these feelings, is to think “well, maybe it would be best to just go back home to Alberta and slide back into the patterns of life we were accustomed to before we embarked on this journey; to go back to the people who we know and are known by. I try to “manage” the uncertainty by reverting to what is familiar, predictable, and safe.

I think that we see the same kinds of things going on in the events leading up to Jesus' arrest. We are mostly familiar, I think, with how Jesus upset the Jewish religious establishment, how he challenged their interpretation of the law, the heavy burden they placed upon the people, and how he threatened the tenuous stability of their situation under Roman rule. And most of us, perhaps, are quite comfortable passing judgment upon those responsible for Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. We see them as somehow different from us. But at the root of all the violence and deceit and manipulation and grasping for control that we see in Jesus' final days is the fear we are all-too familiar with. We see:

- Caiaphas, who was afraid of losing the privilege bestowed upon him by Rome, and of the collapse of the limited autonomy of his people; Caiaphas and the religious elite of Israel knew what had to happen if their status in the Roman Empire and their religious system were to be preserved; they knew that Jesus was not a problem that could be ignored or swept under the rug; as we read in John chapter eleven, the religious leaders clearly understood that Jesus was not just the latest would-be Messiah to emerge from the country; they knew the threat he posed to their religious system; they knew that for the sake of their nation, Jesus must die.

We see:

- The Scribes and the Pharisees, who were haunted by the memory of their nation in exile, and who resolved that they, and everyone under their influence, would keep Torah down to the smallest letter of the law to avoid a repeat of God's judgment; their fear led them to establish a rigid and choking system of laws and regulations a system which neglected the spirit of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness – and upon which Jesus, like the prophets before him, pronounced “Woe!”

We see:

- The disciples, who were afraid of the way that the man they had given the last three years of their lives to was acting, and of the road he seemed determined to go down; we see that their conceptions of what a “Messiah” looked like could not fully accommodate what Jesus seemed determined to be, and do, and allow;

We see

- Peter lashing out in violence in the garden when his fear got the better of him

We see:

- Judas, who was deathly afraid – as his later actions (returning the money, committing suicide) would demonstrate – of the implications of his betrayal of the hope of Israel

Jesus inspired powerful longing, commitment, and hope, to be sure; but as he cryptically remarked in Matthew 10:34, he also came to bring “a sword” – he knew that his presence among his people would provoke division, conflict, confusion, and fear.

Last week Ken and Caterine showed us

- a God who doesn't *demand* the infliction of pain, but who *suffers* it himself
- and that Messianic power absorbs pain rather than inflicting it

I submit to you that Messianic power also embraces, challenges, and conquers fear; it walks into the dark places and emerges victorious out the other side. In the scene of Jesus' arrest, and all of the manipulation, religious hypocrisy, and deceit that went into it, we see a snapshot into the typical human response to the darkness of uncertainty, to the confusion and disorientation that happens when God doesn't come as we would like or expect him to. But Jesus asks us to move beyond the “typical human response” doesn't he? He asks us to trust him, to walk with him even into the darkest most fearful places, because it is through his obedience to face the darkest of places that our redemption is won.

But we don't just journey with Jesus into the dark places because we know he understands and has faced the human predicament with all of the darkness it entails before us; we journey with Jesus because he has *defeated* the darkness. Jesus does not leave us in the darkness, but promises to lead us *out* of it.

We need this hope don't we? As individuals, we know that we will have seasons of darkness in our lives. As a church family, we know that there are times of uncertainty and confusion as far as where God might be leading us. As members of the global community we are anxious and, perhaps, fearful of the massive cultural, economic, and

political forces that shape our lives. In all of these areas, we believe that God is leading us and his world to a future of light and life. Our response to God – be it on the individual or corporate level - does not have to be characterized by fear, and the desperate seizing of what little control we can obtain, but by a determination to walk with a God who comes to us in strange and beautiful ways; a God who inverts our understanding of who he is, and who asks us to trust him with and through our fears.

The coming week is the holiest week in the Christian calendar, the week where God himself entered and defeated the darkness, the violence, the confusion, the hypocrisy, the desire for religious control and management, and the fear that are such prevalent and tragic components of human existence. And he entered our darkness so that joy, not fear, would be God's last word in the world. Frederick Buechner puts it wonderfully:

*God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy, because whatever else it means to say that God created us in his image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in him, even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted by him, his mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood.*

Because of Easter, we have God's joy "in our blood." As we enter this week, as we ponder the arrival of our strange and glorious king, let us determine not to flee from the darkness and confusion in fear, as the disciples did, or to rely on the security provided by religious systems as the religious leaders did, but to cling to Christ, to journey with him into the heart of our fear and brokenness and uncertainty. Let us refuse to allow our fragility, our finitude, and our fallenness to make us fearful "managers" of God and the plans he has for his world which, as we of all people ought to know, are not the same as our plans. Let us transcend our fears – of God, of each other, of a world where God's kingdom has not fully come - and be bearers of light and life in a world which knows much of darkness but in which the light of Easter continues to dawn.