

Save, Now!

Psalm 31:9-16; Luke 19:28-40

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Here we are, at the outset of another Holy Week.

It can be easy for the Scriptures and the sermons the rituals of this day and the week that is coming to become over-familiar to us. This is particularly the case if we have been Christians for a long time.

We know the routine: Jesus makes his way Jerusalem on a little donkey to adoring crowds... the crowds shout “Hosanna!”... And then the scenes at the last supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal of Judas, the arrest, the farce of a trial, the crowd turning on Jesus, demanding the release of Barabbas rather than Jesus...

... and then, of course, the crucifixion, the burial, and—against all odds! —the joyful discovery of an empty tomb which we will celebrate a week from now.

We know the script. At times, it can feel like sliding into some pretty well-worn grooves. This story that is so central to our faith and to our identity as Christians can lose its capacity to surprise us, to move us, to inspire and embolden us.

This is true even for those of us who stand behind pulpits to preach around this time each year.

What can we say that hasn't been said before? What can we say that others haven't said better than we could? How can we make this familiar narrative come alive again for ourselves and for those who will hear our words?

This week, I did what I often do when I am wrestling with these questions. I looked at what I have done in the past.

Most Palm Sundays, I have tended to focus on the theme of expectations.

What did those pilgrims outside Jerusalem anticipate as Jesus made his way into the city? What

did they hope for? What were they itching to see, to hear, to experience? And how were those expectations met or frustrated?

The word “Hosanna” literally means, “save” or even “save, now!” which communicates more of the urgency of the word. But nobody in that crowd could have imagined how Jesus would accomplish this.

So, we know a bit about *human* expectations on Palm Sunday.

This year, I found myself asking a different question: What did *Jesus* expect as he trudged along on that little donkey outside Jerusalem?

What was going on in *Jesus’* heart and mind as he heard the glad “Hosannas?” What was going on underneath the surface?

What did Jesus expect?

Well, he knew that he was going to die. This much seems obvious if we have been paying attention to the gospel accounts of his three-year ministry.

In Luke, Jesus predicts his death six times before he arrives at the gates of Jerusalem.

Luke 9:22: And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Luke 9:43-45: “While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. But they did not understand what this meant.”

Luke 12:50 (this one’s a bit more obscure): “But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

Luke 13:33: I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

Luke 17:24-25: For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Luke 18:31-34: Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and

everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

So, Jesus is expecting to suffer, and he is expecting to die. This much is clear.

He knows what is coming. But Jesus is not marching off to die in a kind of “business-as-usual” kind of way, as if he just has one more thing to check off his list as the Incarnate Son of God.

He is not a robot; he is a human being.

The oldest creeds of the Christian faith have always stubbornly insisted that Jesus is *fully* God and *fully* human.

Not some kind of half and half God-man hybrid. Not 50% of each. Jesus isn’t God in a human body who only *seems* to be experiencing the joys and sorrows of human life.

No, fully God, fully human.

Even before the creeds took shape, the early church insisted upon it. Colossians 2:9:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

Hebrews 1:3:

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

We struggle to understand this, to conceptualize it.

If we think of Jesus as fully God, he must only *appear* to be human—all the language portraying him suffering and doubting and wishing there was another way must largely be for our benefit, to give the appearance of humanity.

If Jesus was fully human, he’s largely a victim of injustice, as powerless to affect the forces that act upon him as you and I would be.

The divinity and humanity of Jesus is one of the deep mysteries of the Christian faith. But it is one that we, too, must stubbornly cling to.

It is less a doctrine to be explained than a mystery to be proclaimed.

From birth to death, Jesus takes on the *fullness* of human experience.

So, as he marches into Jerusalem on a colt, he does so not as the risen and exalted Lord of Creation but as a thirty-three-year-old rabbi at the end of a harrowing three-year ministry, with dark clouds looming on the horizon

What does Jesus expect?

I think Psalm 31 could well narrate what's going on inside Jesus. There's a reason that this Psalm is included among the lectionary texts each year on Palm Sunday.

Jesus routinely gives expression to what he is feeling via the Psalms, particularly during his darkest hour.

On the cross, he quotes Psalm 22:1: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus' last recorded words come from Psalm 31:5: "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

And so, it seems reasonable to assume that the words of Psalm 31 might express some of what Jesus was experiencing beneath the surface at the outskirts of Jerusalem, and what he would certainly experience five days later.

I want to read this Psalm again. As you listen, think about Jesus on his little donkey, the weight of the world on his shoulders, bracing himself to do what he knows he must.

Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;

my eyes grow weak with sorrow,

my soul and body with grief.

¹⁰ My life is consumed by anguish

and my years by groaning;

my strength fails because of my affliction,

and my bones grow weak.

¹¹ Because of all my enemies,

I am the utter contempt of my neighbors

and an object of dread to my closest friends—

those who see me on the street flee from me.

¹² I am forgotten as though I were dead;

I have become like broken pottery.

¹³ For I hear many whispering,

“Terror on every side!”
They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.

Can we imagine Jesus entering Jerusalem frightened, uncertain, in anguish and sorrow? Can we imagine him thinking, “I’m not sure I can do this?” Can we resist the temptation to jump ahead to the victory of Easter Sunday and contemplate the human Jesus outside Jerusalem?

Is there room in our theology for a God who enters into the deepest and darkest places of human sorrow, fear, and apprehension?

There should be.

I think that this is one of Christianity’s great gifts to the world. There is no other religion that makes the audacious claim that God suffers alongside his own creation.

There is no other religion that portrays a God so vulnerable, so weak, so human.

There is no other religion that scandalously insists on a God who allows himself to be the victim of the sin and violence of his own creatures in an incredible display of love and self-sacrifice.

Many people shrink away from this claim. As I said, it’s easier to think of divine Jesus undergoing all of the awful events of Holy Week as a kind of performance for our benefit.

Yes, he suffered, but you know, he was *God*. It’s not the same as if it was you or I! All of this is just the prelude to resurrection.

But I think we must sit with passages like Psalm 31. We must sit with Jesus weeping outside Jerusalem because his people refuse the things that make for peace. We must enter into the anguish of his experience.

Because there is good news even here, even before we get to Easter Sunday

The good news is that as Christians we worship a God who knows what it’s like to be human.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it’s like to be deeply and persistently misunderstood.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it’s like to be betrayed by people that you love, people you had poured the best part of yourself into, people you expected better from, people from whom you had hoped for more.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it’s like to be afraid, to have that sinking feeling of dread in

your stomach, to have your mouth go dry and your strength fail.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to feel helpless and angry at the inevitability of human lust for power and control and scapegoating.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to feel like the bad guys always win.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to feel used—to be loved and adored only when you're giving people what they want, when you're putting on a show.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to be abandoned and to feel utterly alone.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to be mocked, ridiculed, dismissed.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to be seen as a failure.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to suffer and to die.

These are some of the hardest things we experience as human beings. And because of Jesus, God not only knows what they feel like, but enters right into them with us.

God knows what it's like to be human from the inside.

Because of Jesus.

Our text from Psalm 31 doesn't end with sorrow and sadness, but with a determined expression of trust:

¹⁴But I trust in you, Lord;

I say, "You are my God."

¹⁵My times are in your hands;

deliver me from the hands of my enemies,
from those who pursue me.

¹⁶Let your face shine on your servant;

save me in your unfailing love.

Jesus hoped for vindication and deliverance. Despite all that he saw coming, he knew that this would not be the end of his story. He knew that deliverance was coming.

He knew that all of the awful things that were coming and all of what he was feeling as he took his first fateful steps into Jerusalem, could be redeemed because of the unfailing love of God.

The title of my sermon is “Save, now!”

They are the words of fragile and fickle human beings who sing songs of adoration outside Jerusalem, eager for God to do what we expect.

Save, now! Hosanna! We’ve been waiting. We’ve seen what you can do! We’ve had enough of losing and we’re ready to win.

They are also the words of Jesus as he marches off to die.

Save, now! In your love—for me, for those who don’t know what they are doing, for all of creation, accomplish your salvation. Now is the time.

Our time, like Jesus’, is in God’s hands.

As we walk into Holy Week, my prayer for each one of us is that our trust in the Man of Sorrows would be deepened and strengthened.

My prayer is that we would in some small way enter into his suffering as he has entered into and overcome ours.

And my prayer is that we would take comfort and courage in what we face on the journey of life and faith, knowing that our God is not some remote, detached deity who floats over the pain of the world, but who enters into it, experiences it, and ultimately transforms and defeats it.

This is good news. This is our God.

Amen.

