

Dragged to Salvation

John 12:12-36

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I'm discovering that preaching in the time of pandemic is a strange thing.

If you're anything like me, time has taken on a bit of a funny feel. Everything seems somehow off kilter, stretched out, indeterminate. It's easy to feel like you've kind of lost your bearings.

One of the endless internet memes floating around social media these days captured what many of us are feeling: "In case you lost track, today is March 98th!"

That's what it feels like, doesn't it? We don't really know where we are or what we're supposed to be doing these days.

Our personal rhythms are off. We're working from home, adjusting our patterns, dealing with the loss of regular routines.

On a personal note, I have to have my sermons ready a few days earlier than usual, which is inconvenient 😊.

I find myself speaking to a mostly empty sanctuary and doing strange things like saying "good morning" on a Friday night as we record these services.

Gone are the usual rhythms of the promise of spring and the approach of Holy Week. All many of us can think about is this miserable virus whose steady advance is endlessly documented and charted for us daily.

Our days are now spent reading the news, watching the news, drifting around social media, waiting for health updates, monitoring the latest set of social restrictions or gloomy economic predictions, scanning the horizon for any sign of good news, praying that this won't last as long as some people are saying.

COVID-19 has kind of colonized our sense of time.

Lent seems like a distant memory. Perhaps we can barely summon much enthusiasm to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem this Palm Sunday and we're perhaps struggling to imagine a Holy Week and especially an Easter Sunday in the context of physical isolation.

If any of the preceding describes how you are feeling, I want you to know that you are not alone! I feel the same way. I know others do, too.

This year, Holy Week comes to us in a very strange moment in our world and in our lives. Nobody has faced anything like this in our lifetime.

It's so hard to know what will happen. Are our leaders taking the right approach? What will the costs (economic, mental, social) of months of isolation be? We simply don't know. There is much that we don't know.

It's normal to feel unsettled and disoriented by all that is going on in our world.

But we still want to enter into Holy Week with faith and hope. We have to.

As Christians, we believe that this week is indeed the high point of our year. We believe that without the story that is told from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, the church would not exist, and we would be without hope.

And so, I hope that we can do this, even if we have to do it in different ways this year.

Palm Sunday is a strange Sunday in the Christian calendar. It's kind of like that scene in the movies where everyone is blissfully celebrating at a party where the viewer knows that something bad is coming.

Each year, I'm reminded of N.T. Wright's description of Palm Sunday as "an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God's answer."¹

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 69.

Our two texts this morning highlight this. It's actually one continuous narrative but we broke it up in our readings.

Our first reading is a party scene. Jesus' enters Jerusalem to a cheering throng.

His reputation has preceded him. His public ministry has turned him into a person of significant interest, both to his admirers and to his enemies.

Everyone is watching as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. The people wave their palm branches and cry, "Hosanna!" in anticipation of a coming king.

The people in Jesus' day knew what they wanted from God and from God's anointed one. They wanted a mighty king to rule from Jerusalem. They wanted the Romans out and a Jewish king in. They wanted punishment for their enemies—all those who had oppressed them for long years. They wanted a righteous king and the fulfillment of all they had hoped for.

We know that Jesus will fail to meet these expectations even if the crowd doesn't yet.

John's version of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the shortest of the four gospels. It's also the only one that mentions Lazarus (whose story we heard last week).

Bringing someone back from the dead is the kind of thing that will get you a lot of fans in a real hurry!

And the raising of Lazarus is a game changer in John's gospel. After this that the Jewish leaders intensify their plot to kill Jesus. No would-be-Messiah or populist rabbi had ever done anything like this before. It was drawing enormous crowds and making Jesus immensely popular.

The Pharisees realize that this Jesus is becoming a threat they can no longer contain.

So, we have the religious elites bemoaning Jesus' popularity and plotting his downfall, we have an expectant crowd hungry for this worker of miracles—this man who can even raise the dead!—to put on a show.

What does Jesus do?

He subverts the narrative. He engages in a prophetic (and perhaps slightly comedic) bit of "street theatre" to mock the power of Rome.

Sidling into Jerusalem on the back of a pitiful little donkey was meant to provide a stark contrast to the procession of a “real” king.

Jesus is offering a powerful critique to Rome, to power, to business as usual, to the way power is sought and used and abused and lorded over others.

He is enacting his own words: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mat. 20:26-27).

The people love it. For now.

Raising Lazarus from the dead, turning water into wine, healing, ticking off the elites, making fun of Rome... these things are all pretty cool. The people cheer!

But the cheering won’t last long.

I suspect that even on Palm Sunday, some the crowd were chuckling along with his ridiculous entry on a donkey but also secretly thinking, “Ok, Jesus, nice joke... we get it... But let’s get on with the “mighty king” business, shall we?”

The first part of the story ends with the people clamouring to see this Jesus who had raised a dead man and who was now apparently coming to claim his throne, and with the Pharisees plotting his destruction.

The second part of this passage takes a fairly dramatic turn. Some Greeks who are in Jerusalem for the festival request an audience with Jesus.

And then Jesus does what he does almost nowhere else in the gospels. He not only predicts his coming death (which he does elsewhere), but he interprets it. He describes what it will accomplish.

In our second reading, with joyful hosannas still echoing in his ear, Jesus’ mood darkens. He is fully human, and he feels the agony of what is coming keenly.

“My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour” (John 12:27).

As Christians, we celebrate all of Jesus’ life and ministry. We celebrate his incarnation, we honour his teachings and example, we anticipate his coming again in glory.

But Jesus himself says that *this* is his hour. He has come to die.

He has come to absorb the sin of the world, to expose the human desire for vengeance and scapegoating, to forgive his enemies, to defeat death by going through it to the other side to resurrection.

Christians have spent two thousand years articulating various “theories” or “models” of the atonement, to describe what actually happened on the cross. We piece together our theologies of the cross from parts of the gospels and from Paul’s letters, attempting to come to an understanding of what could possibly have necessitated the very murder of God.

Was Jesus substituting himself on our behalf, taking the punishment that our sins demanded? Was he offering an example of nonviolent love for us to emulate? Was he exposing the corruption of human religious and political systems? Was he defeating the power of evil? All of the above?

Well, here, Jesus himself *tells* us what his death will accomplish (I’m leaning on Brian Zahnd’s reflections here²):

1. The cross will judge the world.
2. The cross will drive out the prince of this world.
3. The cross will draw all people to Jesus.

The cross will judge the world.

It will tell the truth about God, about the world, about sin, and about salvation. It will be a judgment on “business as usual” and on corrupt religion. It will tell the truth on the deepest and darkest corners of the human heart.

The cross will render a true judgment on the world as it is presently arranged and on the human heart alienated from and indifferent to God.

² Brian Zahnd, *The Unvarnished Jesus: A Lenten Journey* (Spello Press, 2019), 137-39.

The cross will drive out the prince of this world.

We don't talk about the devil much as sophisticated modern Christians. But Jesus did. Quite a lot, actually.

Jesus understood the world to be a battleground between the kingdom of God and the powers and principalities of darkness.

On the cross, the prince of this world appears victorious, murdering the Son of God. But it is through apparent defeat that God, in Christ, wins the victory over the enemy of God and the enemy of God's creation.

On the cross, Jesus does battle with the foe that he encountered in the wilderness (way back at the beginning of Lent), whispering in his ear, "Come on Jesus, take the way I'm offering, give the people what they want, what they need. Put on a show for them, they'll love you for it. Just bow down and worship me and you can have it all."

Jesus refused the accuser in the wilderness and he refuses him again on Calvary.

This time, though, he exposes and makes a mockery of him, defeating all the hunger for violence and lust for power and selfish ambition that are the hallmarks of the accuser with forgiveness and sacrificial love.

The cross and the empty tomb is how the prince of the world is driven out. As Paul says in Colossians 2:15:

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

What looks like a pitiful scene of execution turns out to be the coronation of a king.

The cross will draw all people to Jesus.

The cross is where the crucified Christ, arms forced open wide, extends forgiveness, healing, welcome and embrace to all people. It is where the hatred of the world collides with the sacrificial love of God.

The Greek word that is translated “draw” is *ηελκυο* (pronounced hel-koo'-o) and it's an interesting one. It could also be translated “drag” or “pull.”

It's the same word that is used in:

- Jam 2:6 Are not the rich oppressing you and **dragging** you into the courts?
- Joh 21:6 He told them, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they threw the net, and were not able to **pull** it in because of the large number of fish.
- Act 16:19 But when her owners saw their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and **dragged** them into the marketplace before the authorities.

There are other examples, but in these contexts, hel-koo'-o is a forceful word.

Maybe it's just because of COVID-19 and because we're all feeling a little helpless to help ourselves these days, but I like the word “drag” better than “draw” this week.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will [drag] all people to myself.

The cross is where God shows that human rebellion and wickedness and selfish pride and love of violence and scapegoating, where a groaning creation that longs for redemption, where sickness and death and disease and all that frustrates God's creational intent... the whole ugly package is no match for the love of God.

This is the good news. It's good news all the time, but perhaps it's particularly good news during a pandemic.

The love of God is stronger than this virus. The love of God is deeper than the despair or loneliness or anger or confusion you might be feeling. The love of God can sustain you in the midst of suffering and give us a hope that is stronger than the trial you are facing.

Jesus will drag us to himself, to the fullness of life he offers in this world and the next.

Jesus will drag us to faith, hope, and love even when things look dark and bleak, as they do right now.

When he is lifted up—on a cross outside Calvary and from the earth to reign at the right hand of the Father—Jesus will drag us to salvation.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

