

Palm Sunday

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[0 : 0 0] Feel free to jump up and down at any moment in the sermon. If you could put the first slide up, that would be marvelous.

That would tell me that it works. I love that bit from Matthew's account of the Palm Sunday events where the crowd in Jerusalem says, who is this?

And the crowd with Jesus, who are people from the north, who've come down to Jerusalem for the festival. They say, he is Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee.

He's our boy. He's our boy come down for the feast with us. It's a great moment. Interesting, that is only part of the slide.

It's going to be great when the words come up. We'll see how we go. So here is Jesus. He is coming into the city with lots of smiling faces and people waving palm branches.

[1 : 0 5] And it's a time of expectant and exultant joy. And what does Luke tell us happens? In the midst of all this, Luke tells us Jesus wept.

He wept over the city. As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, Luke tells us, he wept over it and said, if you, even you, had only known on this day, what would bring you peace?

But now it's hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.

They will dash you to the ground. You and the children within your walls, they will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.

Everybody is laughing and joyful and waving banners and Jesus is weeping because they don't get it. They don't get what it is that will make for peace.

[2 : 1 5] And we still don't get it. That happens when I do that. We still don't get it. In a week when countless thousands of lives have been wiped out by cluster bombs and cruise missiles and assault rifles brought in a supermarket in downtown America and handguns and knives, countless lives snuffed out.

You still don't get what makes for peace. And Jesus is still weeping. If you only knew what brought you peace, and he is weeping still.

And here at the beginning of the Easter story, oh, Jesus has disappeared from that picture. Here at the beginning of the Easter story is the beginning of how God puts right what causes the fact that we don't know what makes for peace.

It's the moment when Jesus' destiny becomes clear and when his journey to the cross becomes inevitable because that is where God will make peace.

Reflecting on this moment and lots of others from the life of Jesus, Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2, not to steal the thunder of the person who's preaching on Philippians 2 just after Easter, I hasten to add.

[3 : 29] Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man.

He humbled himself. Here is your king, humble and riding on a donkey. He humbled himself, says Paul, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Peace costs. In fact, the price is so high that only God can pay it. Hence, Jesus needing to take a donkey ride to the tomb and beyond.

Ah, yeah. Slides are too big, it seems, to fit on the screen. So don't worry. It's okay. The pictures are not essential. Just listen to the words and imagine the pictures that might be coming.

You see, Jesus is on a surprising journey. He is a surprising bringer of peace. He is not bringing peace the way people think that peace comes.

[4 : 42] A city full of people who were expectant that God would come to their rescue and peace would break out. They were crying to God in their pain and their confusion and their loneliness.

Others, of course, were perfectly clear how God worked and it wasn't through some upstart carpenter from the north riding a donkey into the city. And the Pharisees said to Jesus, stop all this.

And he said, well, if we stop all this, the stones will cry out what is going on. Because the stones recognize what's happening, even if you don't. The time of the great unraveling of all that causes conflict and pain and division is arriving.

And it's arriving in a carpenter on a donkey in a city. There was, of course, another procession happening, possibly on the same day. We don't... Ooh, that's better.

Possibly on the same day. We don't know. But is that... Oh, I can have that one. Okay. Well, that's fair enough. It's a nice one. It's a nice one. Possibly on the same day, maybe a day or two before or a day or two after, but there's another procession into the city, a city that came up from Caesarea Maritime, where Pilate, the governor, lived most of the time because it was a nice place to live.

[6 : 09] Jerusalem was horrible. It was sweaty and full of people, particularly people that the Romans didn't particularly like. So there was another procession coming into the city, and this was a procession of pomp and circumstance and ceremony and armed men.

This was Pilate with the world's most powerful army surrounding him, the superpower, bringing peace out of the barrel of a gun, or the ancient world's equivalent.

Peace through the sword, through conflict, through bloodshed, through killing all your enemies until you are the last people standing. That's how they understood peace would come.

The Pax Romana, and it was symbolized by this pomp and ceremony of Pilate and his entourage coming into the city for the festival, for Passover, so that he could show his face and do a bit of the glad handing that governors had to do before he retreated to Caesarea Maritime, which was on the coast and much nicer.

So here are two processions, each claiming to be a bringer of peace, each claiming to be the way in which peace will arrive.

[7 : 33] Jesus, weeping on a donkey. It might come up, but then again, it might not. And Jesus is a surprising bringer of peace. But he is also a model for how we, as his followers, work for peace.

Because we are called to follow in his footsteps. We are called to be those who, in Jesus, get what it is that makes for peace.

And so Jesus comes and he shows us. Peacemaking rocks the boat. Peacemaking disturbs the peace. Peace. Peacemaking is a breach of the peace before peace emerges from the center of what is happening.

This is a surprising moment in Jesus' life. He is choosing to ride a donkey. He's walked everywhere else in his life. He has walked in a way that means that he mixes with the ordinary people.

But now he's chosen to ride a donkey. And he's chosen to ride a donkey because... Who wants to tell me why he chose to ride a donkey? Because it was a humble beast, yeah?

[8 : 50] Sorry? Yeah, somebody prophesied it. Zachariah. But who else did it in Israel's past? David. And David did it at the end of the civil war that broke out in his family and spilled out into Israel.

And at the end of that civil war, David had a choice. He could have ridden back into Jerusalem on his white charger with his armor on and all that stuff. David chose to ride into the city on a donkey as a sign that he was coming in peace.

Next slide, if you can manage that. Yeah, so peacemaking rocks the boat. It's surprising. It causes a stir.

It is a breach of the peace to begin with. But out of it emerges something that is better for everybody. The Pharisees, of course, horrified by all this.

This isn't how it's done. This is not how we will get the peace we're looking for. Forty years later, the Pharisees will be wielding swords and fighting the Romans on the streets in Jerusalem because peace will come through rebellion and through bringing down the Roman overlords.

[10 : 12] But not yet. Don't rock the boat yet. It's not ready yet. We will be ready soon. People are plotting in the back streets. They are gathering their forces together.

And eventually they will be ready. Maybe 30 years after Jesus rode in on a donkey. They will rise against the Romans in order to drive the Romans into the sea and bring about the peace of God's kingdom.

Actually, Jesus predicted what would happen. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground.

You and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone upon another. Which is precisely what happened in 70 AD. Not one stone was left standing on another as the Romans crushed the rebellion for peace and the kingdom of God.

Because Jesus says that kind of way of bringing about peace doesn't cut it. It doesn't work. It just brings about conflict and pain and misery.

[11 : 20] So Jesus is rocking the boat in order to demonstrate another way of bringing peace. But secondly, peacemaking breaks your heart.

Jesus weeps over the state of the world. Peacemaking breaks your heart. He is heartbroken at the warring present.

At the shining military machine that's escorting the Roman governor into the city. Not bringing peace but bringing oppression. British leader, when Claudius invaded Britain, and crushed all the opposition and brought the Brits to their knees and brought them to the place where he had set up his camp, the British leader said to Claudius, you proclaim the Pax Romana by oppressing anyone who disagrees with you.

He was of course led off to be executed soon afterwards. But he was absolutely right. The Pax Romana was not peace. It was oppression by the strongest military.

And Jesus weeps over it. Peace is not delivered by the strongest army. Peace is not a heavily armed standoff where security justifies keeping things as they are with all the injustice and suffering it means for so many.

[12 : 43] Peace is not tear gassing the displaced. It's not confining exiles to barracks and barges and stripping them of their rights in a way that means that we remain powerful and they remain weak and oppressed.

That is not peace. That is oppression that comes out of the barrel of a gun. And it is what causes Jesus to weep. It breaks his heart.

But the third thing we see about this donkey ride to the empty tomb is that peace breaks in on the future. Peacemaking is something that comes from the future into the present.

What will the future be like? Well the future will be a time when there is peace and there is justice and there is well-being and there is welfare for everybody. For the kingdom of God will have come in all its fullness and there will be no weeping and there will be no illness and there will be nothing that breaches the peace because God reigns over all.

And that future is being dragged into the present by Jesus' cross and resurrection and it begins as he rides his donkey into Jerusalem.

[14 : 01] And it says, if you knew what made for peace then you would see what was happening. And as the New Testament authors tried to get their heads around what was going on here, the word peace keeps cropping up in how they describe what has happened through Jesus.

So Paul, writing in Ephesians chapter 2, says this, But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ for he is our peace.

In his flesh he has made both into one. He has made two into one. He has brought peace where there was conflict and enmity.

And we tend to see this only in terms of our personal reconciliation to Jesus through the cross and the forgiveness of our sins. And that is a kind of nano part of what Paul is talking about here.

Paul is talking about the beginning of the reconciliation of all things in Christ. As he says in Ephesians 1 and verse 10, He has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall.

[15 : 20] That is the hostility between us. That he might create in himself one humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace and might reconcile both to God.

So he came and proclaimed peace. What he did is he came into Jerusalem. He wept for the city, but he proclaimed peace to the city. If only you knew what made for peace.

And he offered it to those who were near and he offered it to those who were far away. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the way in which peace is offered to the world.

And reflecting on it, Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, that the first Easter, these events, the donkey ride into Jerusalem, the walk to the cross, and the bursting out of the empty tomb, these events are not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are being destroyed, but it is God's wisdom, a hidden mystery which God has decreed before the ages for our glory and which none of the rulers of this age understood.

For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. If Pilate and the chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees and even the crowds in Jerusalem had actually understood who Jesus was, the week that leads on from Palm Sunday would have been very different.

[16 : 56] They didn't. And they couldn't. They couldn't see it. They were blinded by their own folly and sin and rebellion. Paul goes on to say, for what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed it by his spirit.

Who too? You and me. To us who see and get what's going on on Palm Sunday. But why has he revealed it to you and me?

He's revealed it to you and me so that we too could become surprising peacemakers like Jesus. We are called to be people who bring peace.

And it will be difficult. Oh. It will be difficult. It will rock the boat. It will break our hearts. If we don't weep over the fact that there's somebody who comes into this building on a Monday who cannot cook food at home for himself because it costs too much and we need to see a doctor.

There are doctors in the house so you could go and see a doctor. If we are not broken in some way by that then we have not got what Jesus is about.

[18 : 16] We are called to be peacemakers like him. We are called to take our stand with him disturbing the peace so that we might bring peace about.

We are called to make peace. We are called to be the mender of broken relationships. We can't do that in the world if we can't do that with the person sitting next to us in church.

We can't be peacemakers in a world, in a community that needs peacemakers above everything else if we can't actually be reconciled to one another.

Do we get what's going on? Do we see what is happening? And are we aware of our calling to be those who bring peace?

It seems to me that every community and every office and every family and every political system and every big decision that has to be made they all need to be flooded with people who get the fact that peacemaking comes in the way Jesus laid down.

[19 : 22] We need to be agents of reconciliation. We need to be people who bring enemies together in order that they might sit together and be reconciled to one another as Paul talks about in Ephesians.

We are followers of the one who rode into Jerusalem and who through his cross and resurrection brought us peace and who in turn turns us into troublemaking, heartbroken, future-pointing peacemakers.

Blessed are the peacemakers, said Jesus, for they are the children of God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the children of God.

There is no higher calling in the world than to be someone who makes and brings and promotes peace. starting in our community, in this church, and rippling out into all the places that we will go this week.

Let's pray. Father, we see Palm Sunday so often as a moment of joy and an eruption of thanksgiving and meeting of expectation because here is Jesus riding into the city to proclaim that he is the king that they have all been longing for.

[20 : 40] Yet it is also a moment of profound heartbreak because here is a city that doesn't know what peace is about but looks in all the wrong places to find it. And we thank you that Jesus the peacemaker has found us and he has brought us peace with you but also potentially with everybody in this room and everybody that we will have contact with this week.

And so we pray that in the footsteps of Jesus we will be troublemaking, heartbroken, and future pointing peacemakers for your glory.

Amen.