

Sermon "Easter is Coming"
Kirk of St James
Sunday April 13, 2025
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Our Psalm reading this morning was a very important story for the people of Israel, and one they retold every year. It is the last Psalm in a collection known as the Egyptian Hallel Psalms. This collection (which starts at 113 and goes to 118) "recounts and celebrates God's saving action in the Exodus from Egypt and is still read during the Jewish Passover celebration." It is a joyful Psalm filled with thanksgiving and praise and is also a song of victory. It celebrates the love and care of God and affirms his protection and guidance. Yet among all the celebration and praise there is a little section that stands out--those hints at something more.

In verse 22 it reads "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." This brings all the noise and chaos of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem back into focus and sets the stage for what is to come. As one author says, "It speaks of God's choosing an unlikely instrument, of God's confounding conventional wisdom...a way of salvation that exalts the weak and the powerless will always seem strange, and the way of the cross downright absurd...God indeed works through materials that many prudent architects of society would reject." The birth and life of Jesus from start to finish is not what anyone expected. He is the stone that will be rejected, he is the Messiah no one saw coming and today is the final push toward the end.

For three years Jesus has travelled around the countryside sharing the good news of the gospel. The disciples have travelled with him watching miracle after miracle, and hearing teachings being reinterpreted in ways they never expected. Was it possible the warrior King messiah they had been hoping for was just a carpenter from Galilee? His message of love and peace while unexpected must have rung true for the disciples, because they faithfully followed him. They saw demons being cast out, food multiplied, and people raised from the dead. Living in the ancient world there were a lot of different gods and beliefs. There were many people who claimed to be many things.

But among all the voices Jesus was different. By this point in Luke Jesus has warned the disciples three times that he is going to die, but they cannot grasp this message. Can this man who is the Messiah, who can raise the dead--actually die? Surely this is just the beginning of something big.

Last week in John we read about Lazarus being raised from the dead. When word of this reached the religious authorities, they begin to panic and plot not only for the death of Jesus but also Lazarus who is proof of what has happened. In some ways it is like the popular 90's television show the X-Files whose tag line is "the truth is out there" but people and governments are always trying to hide it. If they can get rid of Jesus and Lazarus there is no proof anything out of the ordinary has happened. All of this is agitating in the background when Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem. Judas is plotting and the high priests are scheming, just waiting for the moment when Jesus messes up and gives them a reason to arrest him.

When the time comes for Jesus to enter Jerusalem it is among much fanfare. Often when Kings and powerful political leaders were entering into a city crowds would gather to watch the spectacle. There has already been a procession into the city this week from the west. Pilate had come "draped in the gaudy glory of imperial power: horses, chariots, and gleaming armor. He moved in with the Roman army at the beginning of Passover week to make sure nothing got out of hand." Meanwhile from the east comes Jesus riding on a donkey. When he enters the city people begin spreading their cloaks out before him, praising God with the words from Psalm 118 "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven." The crowd is so excited the Pharisees worry the noise will reach the ears of people like Pilate, on the watch for trouble.

While the lectionary does not include what happens next in the passage it is important. When Jesus sees the whole city spread out before him, he begins to weep and lament "Jerusalem! If only today you knew the things that make for peace, but you do not know them. They are hidden from your eyes." They do not know that they are

about to reject the cornerstone. They do not truly understand who Jesus is, and what is he here to do. Matthew Ruttan is a Presbyterian minister in Barrie Ontario, and he wrote a wonderful reflection called *In Plain Sight* in it he says

"There's an old story about the Sufi dervish called Mullah Nasrudin.

He was smuggling treasure across the border and was somehow eluding the guards.

Here's how Geneen Roth tells it:

"Every day for four years he would parade back and forth, and with every crossing the guards knew he was hiding expensive goods that he would sell for outrageous amounts of money on the other side.

But despite their thorough searches, and despite the fact that they could see that he was prospering, they could find nothing in the saddle of the donkey he rode.

Finally, years later, after Nasrudin had moved to another country, the frontier guard said, "Okay, you can tell me now. What were you smuggling?"

Nasrudin smiled broadly. "My dear friend," he said, "I was smuggling donkeys."

God has hidden riches in your life in plain sight. But do you see them? Or are you always paying attention to the wrong details?"

This message struck home this week. Jesus, the greatest treasure, the greatest gift humanity has ever received lived and walked among us, yet we could not recognize him. Jerusalem has the keys to peace in their hands, but not the eyes to recognize it. Jesus was the treasure in plain sight but, nobody could see his worth until it was too late. The Pharisees focused on the wrong parts--instead of seeing the miracle of Lazarus, they only saw a threat. Instead of hearing Jesus' message of love, they used his words to incite anger and hatred. In many ways it is difficult to believe that the joy of Psalm Sunday can turn into the events of Good Friday. For all the joyful hosannas, there is a dissonance found in today that will soon stand out with the next crowd that will gather.

Today is a tough day, and it is difficult to know what to feel. There is the joy of Psalm Sunday, contrasted with what we know will come later in the week. Are we happy, are we sad, are we anxious? For now, we must simply live with the sense of

being unsettled. While that can be hard it is also a reality, for one of the darkest moments in human history is about to take place, followed three days later by one the greatest. There is no easy way to live into that reality. This week is about the journey, about each step that leads to the cross. For now, we are simply asked to make that journey with Christ in the most faithful way we can.

There is also a temptation with Easter to go straight from Psalm Sunday into Easter, skipping the hard part entirely. Maybe we are afraid that we will see ourselves in the crowd. Maybe the darkness of Good Friday threatens to overwhelm us, but we do not need to be afraid. We know the end of the story, we know that God won't leave us but, to truly understand the miracle of Easter, we first need to journey to the grave. Barack Obama once said, "Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it." The events of Holy Week are always uncomfortable, because often we find ourselves in a part of the story we would rather not be in. In the crowd shouting, doubting like Thomas, denying like Peter, or perhaps locked in an upper room like the disciples because we do not believe there is more to the story than death on a cross. The good news is wherever we are in the story Jesus loves us. So this week we sit with the discomfort and we keep reaching, keep hoping, keep fighting, because Easter is coming.