

Zechariah 9:9-10

Luke 19:28-44

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**A LUKAN LENT
WEEPING ON PALM SUNDAY**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

According to an Israeli website called “Israel Inside and Out,” “Looking out over the Old City of Jerusalem from the east, the panorama from the top of the Mount of Olives is Jerusalem’s most iconic view. Across the Kidron Valley lies the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock in the middle, the Al Aqsa Mosque on the south, the domes of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Hurva Synagogue standing out in the Old City behind them, all surrounded by Jerusalem’s high ancient walls. A sealed gate in the Old City’s walls is called the Golden or Mercy Gate. Local legends claim that it will open at the end of days to allow the Messiah to enter the Temple Mount.”¹

When Jesus mounted the donkey and began his descent of the Mount of Olives on that Sunday 2000+ years ago, he would have seen the Temple Mount to the west and the beautiful, magnificent Jewish temple that had been rebuilt when God’s people had returned from exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. Jesus probably also would have seen crowds of Jewish pilgrims climbing up to Jerusalem, singing the psalms of ascent. It was, after all, the Feast of the Passover, when the Jewish people celebrated (and still do today – Passover began yesterday and runs through April 4, Easter Sunday) God delivering them from slavery and the oppression of the Pharaoh in Egypt.

According to Luke’s story, “As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it. . .” (Luke 19:41) As you make your way down the Mount of Olives today, about halfway down you can visit the Church of Dominus Flevit or the Church of the Lord Wept. The chapel was completed in 1955. The architect designed the building in the shape of a teardrop to recall Jesus’ grief and heartbreak over Jerusalem.

Luke is the only gospel writer who mentions Jesus weeping over Jerusalem as he makes his triumphal entry into the city. It’s a rather jarring image isn’t it, on this Sunday when we are so accustomed to waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna!” But that’s the thing – not only does Luke tell us about Jesus weeping over the city, he doesn’t say anything about the people waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna!” It’s a most unusual Palm Sunday story.

Five weeks ago, we began our Lenten journey through Luke’s gospel as Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51) Along the way we have learned what being a Jesus follower entails, found out how to pray, identified with both the prodigal son and his older brother and marveled at God’s endless love, listened in as Jesus told his disciples for the third time, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem . . . and the Son of Man will be handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, and killed,” and been reminded what a difference it can make when salvation in the person of Jesus comes to our houses and into our lives. And, all along the way, lurking in the

background and guiding the journey has been the knowledge (whether we wanted to admit it or not) that Jesus would eventually arrive at Jerusalem and fulfill his mission on the cross.

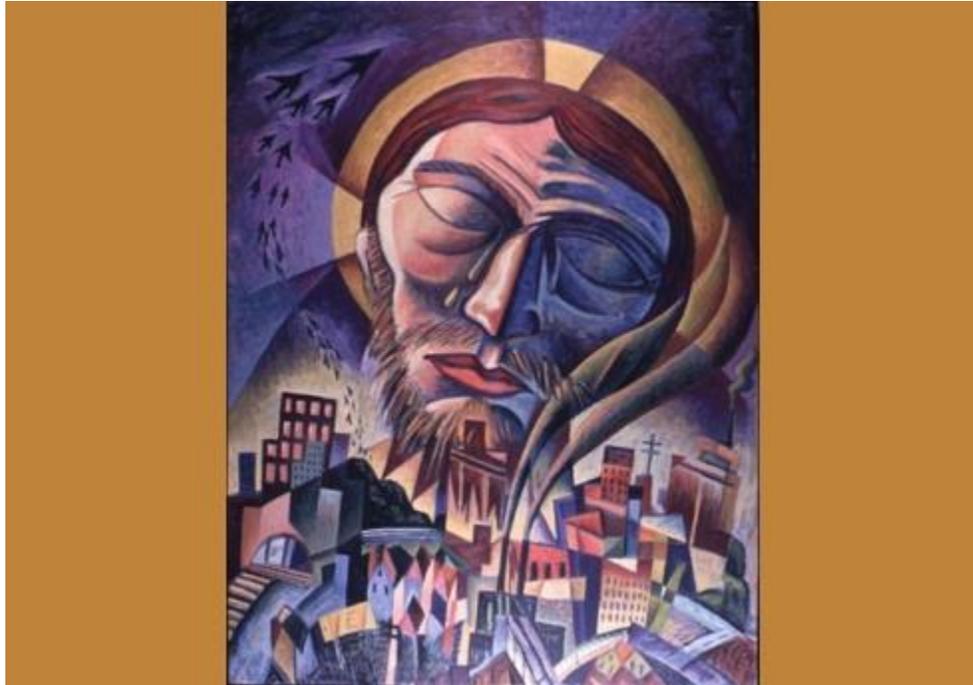
Well, we have arrived, but the journey isn't over yet. We've still got to make the trip with Jesus and his disciples down the Mount of Olives and back up the mountain to Jerusalem and follow Jesus through the coming week. And what a week it was! We talked in Bible study this week about what we would have called today if we didn't have the gospel of John, which is the only story that mentions palm branches. Maybe "Cloak Sunday"? But then someone suggested "Passion Sunday" and that certainly seems to fit. "The Passion of Christ" refers to his suffering which includes much more than his trial before Herod and Pilate and his death on the cross on Friday afternoon.

As work our way back through the week to this Sunday, we remember: Jesus' disciples abandoning him; Peter denying him; Judas betraying him; his disciples falling asleep while he was praying in agony in the garden; the religious leaders questioning Jesus' authority and plotting to kill him. And at the beginning of the week, on the day of Jerusalem's visitation from God, on the day salvation was coming to stay with them, Jesus wept, because God's people did not recognize the things that make for peace! (Luke 19:42)

In my sermon two weeks ago, I said, "But how often do we not grasp the cross? It's not as if we don't understand the words that Jesus says – 'Love your enemies. Seek first the kingdom of God. Take up your cross and follow me.' Too often, though, it's as if we're in denial. We'd rather adorn the Easter cross with spring flowers than pick up our cross and follow Jesus where he leads us." Jesus Messiah riding on a humble donkey is a surprising figure, but we're pretty comfortable with him that way, especially when the air around him is filled with Hosannas and palm branches. But, wouldn't we rather ride right on by Golgotha, the Place of the Skull where he was crucified, right on by Good Friday to the empty tomb and the celebration of Easter Sunday? Of course, we would. But Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, his ride on the donkey down the Mount of Olives, and his activities throughout the following week won't let us do that.

In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Only a suffering God can help. To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism, but to be a human being. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world." That's why Jesus wept while he sat on the donkey and looked across the valley to Jerusalem – he was suffering in the life of the world and he was grieving because the suffering world did not recognize God's salvation that was coming to be with them that day.

Each week Bill suggests a picture or pictures to use in the opening slide of our live streamed and archived worship service. I like the variety of images he selects and the interpretations of the Bible stories by different artists. This week we agreed on a composite slide: Jesus riding on the donkey and Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. As we looked at the "Jesus weeping" picture on Wednesday, I said, "Bill, isn't the city in the picture a contemporary city?" and he said, "Yeah, I think you're right." Bill's going to put that picture up on the screen so you can see what I'm talking about.



What a fascinating interpretation of the Palm Sunday story about Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Surely Jesus must weep as he looks over Boulder, Colorado and Atlanta, Georgia and Washington, D.C. and Damascus, Syria and Hong Kong, China and New Delhi, India and so many more cities around the world, including the still troubled city of Jerusalem. How Jesus must still weep and lament that we so often don't recognize the things that make for peace and the time of our salvation from God.

Yes, there is weeping this Palm Sunday, as we worship on the second Palm Sunday in a row without the excited children walking down the aisle, singing "Hosanna!" and waving palm branches. Yes, there is weeping this Palm Sunday because of everything that we have lost during the past year due to the pandemic. Yes, there is weeping this Palm Sunday because of the anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

But, just as Jesus' weeping as he sat on the donkey on the Mount of Olives wasn't the end of the story, neither is our weeping on this Palm Sunday the end of the story. We can borrow the "Hosannas!" and the palm branches from Matthew, Mark, and Luke and look ahead to Easter Sunday, as long as we don't forget Jesus weeping on the Mount of Olives. The grace and good news on this Palm Sunday is that, nevertheless, Jesus rode that donkey into Jerusalem and brought salvation and peace through his death on the cross on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. As the psalmist wrote, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalm 30:5)

Here is how Frederick Buechner ended his Palm Sunday sermon called "The Things That Make for Peace": "Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take – despair at what in our madness we are bringing down on our own heads and hope in him who travels the road with us and for us and who is the only one of us all who is not mad. Hope in the King who

approaches every human heart like a city. And it is a very great hope as hopes go and well worth all our singing and dancing and sad little palms because not even death can prevail against this King and not even the end of the world, when end it does, will be the end of him and of the mystery and majesty of his love. Blessed be he.”²

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you come to Jerusalem, getting ever closer to the cross, pouring yourself out in order to bring forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation. Strengthen us for the days ahead so that we will remain faithful to you, your will, and your call, until we see you face to face. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “The Mount of Olives – Jerusalem’s Most Iconic View,” at www.israelinsideout.com.

²Frederick Buechner, “The Things That Make for Peace,” in *A Room Called Remember* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).