

“Greater”

Sermon by Pastor David Woolverton
St Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown, PA
Palm Sunday, April 5th, 2020

Hi everyone. Thank you for joining us in worship. You know, when we began the season of Lent – that’s the 40-day season of preparation leading up to Easter – I never imagined that in our challenge of giving something up for Lent we’d be giving up going to Church! Normally, we give up something to re-focus ourselves on our relationship with Jesus... is there something getting in the way? Is there an obstacle that’s been blocking our intimacy with the Lord? Is there something – some sin, some behavior, some brokenness – that’s been tripping me up in my walk of faith? But giving up going to church?? *What’s with that?!*

It’s been intriguing to me – in fact, even a wonderful challenge – to re-imagine church. As I’ve walked with our church staff – and as I’ve talked with my pastor friends – we’ve all been looking at how to share the good news of Jesus by using the technology that we have today, that we never dreamed we’d have just 20 years ago. I have a deep appreciation for those who look so much better on camera than I do!

One thing I do know, is that I miss you. I miss being in the same room with you. I miss our personal connections – our handshakes, our hugs, our singing together, our praying together. While being very important for us as we take care of one another - this “*social distancing*” thing is challenging! The gift of our online worship is that we can continue to draw ourselves and our families into what’s important – the Presence of God in the midst of our lives. The challenge of our online worship is that we are not in the same room at the same time. So, we have to figure out ways to bridge that gap. So, I really appreciate all of our leaders and staff that are pouring their hearts and their time into creating new opportunities for us to stay connected. And for you who do not have access to watching together online, we’re doing something we’ve never done before – we’re typing out manuscripts for you to join us by reading. And I really appreciate each and every one of you for reaching out to check in on one another – especially those who are more senior in age, or more vulnerable in health.

And...We have to figure out what this all means for how we are to continue being the church. I think that God is redeeming this season – by asking us, His Church, to step out of our comfort zones, to say good-bye to our personal preferences, and to challenge us to put Him first. What will that look like for us as we move forward??

In fact, as I look perhaps a bit prophetically towards the future – 6 months, a year, a couple years from now... I think we are going to face a time of post-traumatic stress reactions to what we've been through. Kind of like when we went through 9/11. We are going to be a society that will forever be changed by what we're going through right now.

The challenge is that we're going to have to re-define who we are as a people and as a society. We're going to have to renegotiate our new normal – apart from social distancing.

The good news is that we, followers of Jesus, get to choose how we're going to do that. Because of the Holy Spirit in us, and because we believe in a Life that is beyond this present world, we have the power, here and now, to choose to live differently from the world. We get to pick our response to other people's reactions. So, now... in our time of social distancing... let's practice living differently. Let's practice thinking differently... So, as we go into today's message, I have a question for us...

*How is this day going to be different?
How is it going to be better than yesterday?*

This weekend we celebrate Palm Sunday. It's a day that we remember Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem – just one week – or not even one week – prior to His arrest, the mock trial that He endured, where the religious leaders made false accusations against Him... just days before He would experience one of the worst beatings a man could ever face – floggings... and then ultimately, He would endure the most agonizing death – crucifixion.

But that's all yet to come. Today – it's a day that remembers a highly symbolic parade. Let me read you that account from **Luke 19:28 – 42...**

28 After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

29 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them,

30 "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.' "

32 Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them.

33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

34 They replied, "The Lord needs it."

35 They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. 36 As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. 37 When he

came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! . . . Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

⁴¹ As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes."

I like to read Scripture -- often looking at it from the perspective of the different characters in the passage.

■ ***From the perspective of the disciples...***

Here, Jesus asks them to go ahead of Him into the village and, basically, borrow someone's donkey... "a borrowed burrow" --- like we might go borrow someone's car. ... "The Lord needs it.".... And, that's it! The owner lets them have it. – What we don't know is – was Jesus somehow being prophetic – He just knew that there would be a donkey available at that particular spot? Or had Jesus made arrangements to borrow the burrow from a friend of His, or from one of His followers? – Either way, they bring the animal to Jesus... and they begin to get a good idea of what Jesus has in mind... They remember the prophet **Zechariah 9:9** – that said that "*their king (meaning the future Messiah) would come riding on a donkey*"... So they started getting excited. Could this be the moment that they had waited for??

■ ***From the perspective of the growing crowd...***

The crowd also knew the Zechariah prophecy. They saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem on that donkey and they started getting excited about the prophetic promise of deliverance. So, they started waving palm branches and laying their cloaks on the road and shouting "*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*" – Hosanna means "Save Us!" or "Savior" – So, Jesus came into Jerusalem in a way that was symbolic of what we today might experience as "the red carpet." Jesus was making a grand entrance – highly symbolic – but rather than coming in a limo, He came in humility. And that prophetic image provoked the religious leaders to react.

■ ***From the perspective of the donkey...***

The donkey is a fun one. I can't help but picture Eddie Murphy's voice coming out of its mouth, right? Like the kids' movie Shrek? We sometimes gloss over these minor details in the Bible stories, but the donkey actually is one of the main characters here. The donkey is actually pivotal to the story – to the symbolic act of both humility and prophecy. And it's not the first time that God used a donkey to be a main character in what was playing out. In the Old Testament book of **Numbers**, chapter 22 – we read about a donkey owned by a man named Balaam... a donkey that talked! We've all heard that joke right?... that if God could use a donkey to get Balaam to carry out His plans, God can certainly use you or me! But here, on the road to Jerusalem, the donkey was not the stubborn mule... no, that would have been the religious leaders, the Pharisees!

■ ***From the perspective of the Pharisees...***

The Pharisees – the religious leaders – they definitely knew the Zechariah prophecy. They knew exactly what Jesus was symbolically doing. And they reacted. When they saw the crowd growing and getting more excited... they went to Jesus and said to Him, "Tell your disciples to stop shouting "Hosanna!" – Stop shouting "Savior" and making references to You being the Messiah." They were both outraged ... and nervous... about the implications... But Jesus said to them, "You don't understand, if I tell them to shut up, *the very stones* they – and you— are walking on – *they will shout out!*" In other words, He's saying, "God is about to do something that is **Greater than** anything that has ever happened here... and nothing can stop it."

Each of those perspectives focus on the same thing... something is about to happen that is GREATER THAN what we were used to. Something is about to take place that's going to change the way we've always done things. Something is about to happen that is going to shift the way life has been defined for each of us from this point forward.

Greater.

As you look at today's situation from your perspective – whether you choose to view it from the perspective of seeing yourself as one of the disciples – or one of the people in the crowd watching Jesus – or you've been approaching your faith and life from the perspective of trying to find God by doing faith and life the way you've always done it (kind of like the Pharisees, but perhaps not as historically obstinate) – or you have the perspective of the donkey based on the burden that you feel you have to bear – God is asking us to consider what's about to happen, what God IS DOING in our midst – as being something that is GREATER THAN anything we've been doing up to this point.

Greater.

Without that perspective, we would miss seeing how God is a God who creates out of chaos and births out of nothingness. He makes streams of living water to appear in a desert. He causes beauty to come from our ashes. And He resurrects those who are dead.

What God is about to do within our circumstances today – and within your individual life – and within your marriage and family – is something that will be **GREATER THAN** where you've been and **GREATER THAN** what you have been.

It's one of the reasons why – some 2000 years later – we still remember that parade into Jerusalem. Even though it marks the beginning of Jesus's most agonizing week, it reminds us that of what He was about to do... what He has already done, from our perspective ... was **GREATER**.

We certainly live in scary times right now. We don't know what tomorrow will bring – how many more statistics will be shared, and whether or not our loved ones will be among them... or even if we will be. But what we do know is that what's on the other side of this pandemic – is going to be **GREATER THAN** what's been going on before. How do I know? Because what Jesus faced on the Cross – and what God did in raising Him from the dead... our life already is **GREATER**.

Don't miss this opportunity to put your faith in the God who makes all things new. He's the God who promises to be with us – Immanuel – And God never breaks His promise.

Let us pray... Father, thank You that You are with us – through the storm that we're facing right now, through the redefining of what's going on in Your world. We trust that You are making all things new. Start right here – in us – first. Lord, I give You my heart, I give You my life... in Jesus's Name. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer for the first time – or if you want to begin a new chapter in your relationship with the Lord, would you message me – david@stpauls.faith . I want to celebrate that moment with you.