

“When Jesus Surprises You”

April 14, 2019

Shadow Savior series – Palm & Passion Sunday

How many of you love surprises? I have an aunt who hates surprises. I remember one time when friends organized a surprise birthday party for her, and as soon as she realized it, she bee lined back to her car. I’m not sure why she’s not into being surprised, even when it’s something celebratory, but I know she’s not alone. There’s something off-putting about being caught off-guard. There’s the uncertainty. There’s the lack of control. There’s the worry about what’s coming next.

When we started on this journey through Lent, we said that one goal was to be more honest about our struggles and questions. This idea of Jesus as our “Shadow Savior” is a challenging invitation to confess our confusion, anger, disappointment, fear, and discomfort just like his disciples did. Judas, Peter, and the others were not always crystal clear about why Jesus did what he did or said what he said. And if we’re honest, we struggle, too.

This is the most important week of the year for those who seek to follow Jesus. Yes, we remember how he came into Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna!” (literally “Save us!”). But we have to hear the underlying hope of the crowd: *You can be our king if you do what we want. Save us from Roman oppression. Make it stop! Set us free. Do it now.*

Those who would give Jesus the very cloak off of their backs turn within the course of a few days. They literally take their cloaks and put them on the ground! How many of us have multiple cloaks (or coats) at home. How many of us one to spare? This act was a big deal - not only because it was a sign of loyalty and reverence, but make no mistake - they probably didn’t have an extra cloak at home. This was a clear message of belief and hope in who Jesus was and what he would do. “Hosanna! Save us!”

And we know why they turn away from him - because he doesn’t deliver what they thought God was promising. He doesn’t save them with military power or sword. Instead, he allows those in power to mock him and spit on him and call him all kinds of names. He doesn’t do much to clear his name or fight back – really anything. That’s not winning, is it? How could it possibly be winning?

This is an important moment, and Matthew is sure to write it that way. Everything leads to the fact that Jesus is Messiah - the One they have been waiting for, and yet God’s salvation will come in a surprising way. They want a winner. Those who gathered were waiting and wanting a Messiah to save them from Roman occupation. They wanted someone to get the job done - and fast! *Take over and throw them out!*

But Jesus is not the “power wins” or “the one with the most might is the victor.” He’s been a surprise from the beginning - born to a mother from nowhere Nazareth and a carpenter, surprising the teachers in the Temple as a teenager and making all of them wonder how he’s so wise, going to the people and places that others hold with little regard or respect, healing those who are outside of the circle, spending time with those who were thought of as “less than.” So why are they so surprised?

If you were a first-century Jew, this would have made sense. God's people had been waiting for the Messiah. They'd been waiting for someone, sent from God, who would rule and change the world. Jesus wasn't interested in being their idea of a king. He was intent on changing the whole system - the political landscape and the religious institution, too.

Even his choice of animal sends a clear message. He wants a donkey and a foal. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah, chapter 9, there's a prediction concerning the world's one true king and how he would make himself known: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is his way of saying, "I'm the One you've been waiting for." He doesn't come on a war horse, but in this humble way.

On our vacation, we spent part of a day horseback riding in Arizona. Luka ended up riding a mule named Joe - smaller than the horses and more humble looking - and it made me think of how Jesus came riding into the city. It was a sign of humility, not might. It was a sign of peace, and he comes to usher in true peace for our troubled hearts so that we might be a part of peace-making in the world.

And when they respond by throwing their coats on the ground, it's a sign of honor and victory. When they raise branches in the air and sing “Hosanna!” it's a sign of triumph and victory. “Hosanna” is a Hebrew word that means “Help us” and “Save” with a sense of anticipation that God will act soon! They believe that Jesus is Messiah, but he surprises them!

The parade became a political rally - a protest against the established politics and religious system. Hundreds of thousands lined those streets during this already chaotic week of Passover. And when others asked who this was, riding on a donkey, the paraders tell who he is (or at least who they want him to be).

We call Jesus' ride into Jerusalem the triumphal entry, but it's not triumphant at all by our standards. There's no one official leading him, nothing special to show that he's important, no processional or announcement. The best he receives are the branches that people rip from nearby trees and their own well-worn cloaks given up for this man from Nazareth in whom they put their hope.

The One who is King comes in humility and peace - and surprises us every time we enter this Holy Week. Jesus may not be the One they expected - they were certainly surprised - but Jesus is the One they need. And we may struggle, too, to believe that he is what we need, but we're reminded that his way is peace.

He is with the people, and it's a reminder of the mystery and surprise in the way God works in our lives and in the world. Power isn't found in the mighty or the loud or the strong. True power is found in God-with-us, Jesus, who comes to be crucified for the sake of the world - not to be crowned with earthly power. True power is found in Jesus who chooses to be with us, receive us, love and forgive us.

Jesus doesn't claim the throne of this world with power; he claims the throne of heaven with love. True power surprises us every time. I learned that again this week as I listened to one of our faithful members pray in the midst of a difficult time of illness. She gave thanks for God's steadfast love for her, prayed for her family, prayed for us and our church, and the depth of her faith showed me again what real power – what the Gospel is. Her strength is from God, and it is clear and strong and powerful.

And still, Jesus calls us to challenge what is before us - to critique power and pride that we think is a sign of strength and look to him as he embraces humility and love. What do we want from Jesus? What does he ask from us? Those are questions I'm asking this week.

This Holy Week is an invitation for a time of prayer, sitting, reflecting, walking, waiting, examining and letting go. Will we do these things? Will we let Jesus surprise us - shake us up a bit and get us out of our comfortable places? Take some time to look inside ourselves and contemplate who we are in the eyes of our loving God? Will we let go of the cares of this world so that we might embrace the deeper things of God?

Sing "Shadow Savior" as an invitation to prayer

In this season, we'll be invited to pray and reflect in worship, even writing some reflections if you feel led. As we seek to be honest with God, I ask us to consider these questions:

SHOW SLIDE:

Do you ever feel surprised by what Jesus says or does (or doesn't say or do)?

Does Jesus' humility surprise you?

What prayers are on your heart today as you offer God the struggles of faith?

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER

As we walk this week with Jesus, remember what happened:

Pilate comes in with Romans and shows force during Passover celebration. Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples - what we call the Last Supper, a time for them to remember God's faithfulness and deliverance. He demonstrates servant

leadership by washing their feet – that we find blessing in serving God in others. He tells them that he will be betrayed, and they can't imagine it. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays – “not my will, but yours” - while his disciples fall asleep. Jesus is arrested - Judas betrays Jesus.

Jesus is put on trial: first by Caiaphas, the chief priest, and then by Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate turns Jesus over to be crucified to please religious leaders. Jesus is mocked and beaten by soldiers, and in the meantime, his disciples deny him and flee from him. Jesus dies on a Roman cross.

INTRO: “A Tale of Two Friends”

This week moves quickly from joy to sorrow. Today we hear what Peter and Judas might have said.

SING “Jesus Walked”

The palms that are waved at the beginning of the service become the sign of our “letting go” into the sorrow of the events of the week to come. You're invited to lay your palm at the altar or take it home.