

Sermon: A Time of Trial

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 22:1-6; Luke 22:28-48**

As we are experiencing it today, Palm Sunday begins as a celebration but then things begin to quickly go downhill. It's a tricky day, liturgically speaking. We all love to wave our palms and proclaim Hosanna to the Son of David and so on. It would be terrific if Jesus' story ended there, in an earthly triumph in Jerusalem. But Caiaphas, the chief priests and scribes, Pilate, and Herod, all had their own ideas and interests as to how the story should play out: this Jesus must die.

So, Palm Sunday becomes Passion Sunday.

This is where it gets tricky. Some churches call today Palm Sunday and stop with Jesus entering Jerusalem; everybody's happy. Others call it Passion Sunday. They skip the palm waving and go right to the tomb; everybody's sad.

Since we can't get to Easter without going through the valley, our readings today intend to strike a balance, from the entry into Jerusalem to the moment of Jesus' betrayal, which leads to denial, accusations, suffering, crucifixion, and death. We'll hear the darkest part of the story during the Thursday evening service. Today, we come to the time of Jesus' trial, and we pray that it may not come to us.

Confucius said, 'May you live in interesting times,' and he meant it as a curse. These are certainly interesting times, more interesting than anything we've seen in the last two or three years. Last year, the Red Sox won more games than any team in franchise history and then won the World Series. This year, as of this writing, they have a losing record. Interesting times for Sox fans.

More seriously, we live in an unsettled world, and one could argue that we have *always* lived in an unsettled world. Jerusalem's estimated population in the first century was 100,000 people; an estimated 600 to 1,200 people lived in Capernaum. We can guess that Jesus was easy to spot as he walked from place to place and even easier to approach if one needed healing.

But I wonder if Jesus would get a fair hearing anywhere on the planet today. These days, would desperate crowds follow him around Manhattan, a city of nearly two million people, not counting the weekday commuters? If Jesus decided to take the subway on the day *you* needed help, you might miss him completely. Would he be able to maintain a public ministry in such a setting, or would he have to retreat to Facebook and Twitter, or television, to bring the Good News? If we bumped into him on a street corner, it might be fun to chat for a few minutes but then we'd have to get to work so ...

Maybe he was born at just the right time. Maybe all we need are the Gospels and the knowledge that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Maybe we need the whole Bible, and take our world as it is, and then try to figure out how Isaiah and Luke and Jesus coped with theirs, because their worlds and ours are all equally a mess.

The Bible is a vast collection of wisdom, laws, history, poetry, some ripping yarns, and more. If you want to know anything about human nature, all you need to do is open a Bible and read.

As a group, the four Gospels make up just a small portion of the Bible. Despite the brevity of even the longest Gospel, Matthew, Mark, and Luke each devote about three chapters to Jesus' time in Jerusalem. Of the 21 chapters in John's Gospel, the last nine describe the events in Jerusalem having to do with the passion and the Resurrection.

Usually, the evangelists are fairly terse, but in these chapters, they give us many more details because this part of the story is crucial to how we understand Jesus.

Christians, especially in the early church, get a lot of mileage out of the prophet Isaiah. Today's reading is one of three about God's so-called Suffering Servant, and for Christians, it foreshadows the story of Jesus' suffering.

For some reason, the lectionary lopped off the end of the last verse, but we included it today because you have to read the whole thing; it's part of the oracle and it has meaning for us.

Each one of these verses apply to Jesus: as the teacher who could sustain the weary with a word; as the one who was not rebellious, unwilling to turn away from the cross because it was not his will but God's to be done; the one who endured taunting and insults during his trial; as the one who kept his dignity before Pilate; and as the one who trusts completely in God.

Jesus is the compassionate victim, completely innocent, and about to be judged. One thing to remember, and Isaiah kindly reminds us, is that Jesus' adversaries will also be judged, though they don't know it, like garments that wear out, eaten by moths.

When Jesus was born, the angels sang, 'Peace on earth.' Now, the *people* sing, 'Peace in heaven.' For the people honoring Jesus, Jerusalem was their point of contact between heaven and earth, centered on the Temple. It made sense to them that affirming peace in heaven meant that soon peace would pour out upon the earth. No wonder they were happy: Jesus is the King given to them by God.

If you've read a newspaper later, you can see a distinct contrast between peace in heaven and peace on earth. A pastor named William Carter wrote that he used to have *loud discussions* with his father, a military contractor. A seminarian at the time, Carter spoke often about his dream for world peace. At one point, his father said, 'We will never have peace on earth until we can quiet the wars within our own hearts.'¹

Some people, people like Judas, are perpetually at war in their own hearts, and no one can say how any amount of peace in the world will quiet them. Last week, after Judas complained about the cost of the perfume Mary anointed Jesus with, we asked, who is more lost than Judas? Is Judas beyond saving? Was Judas beyond saving even by Jesus the Good Shepherd?

Today, Luke tells us that '*Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot.*' This is that *opportune time* mentioned in chapter 4. Was it also the moment when Judas' heart went to war with himself? Did anyone notice that he had changed? Did anyone ask him if he was okay, or was he now beyond help? We only know that Satan entered into Judas.

After dinner, Jesus and the disciples had a chat. They've been together for a long time, and we recall how shocked they were when Jesus told them that the Son of Man was going to suffer, be rejected and killed, and on the third day be raised. Now, whether they realize it or not, that prophecy is about to happen.

This is the moment Jesus decides to make an announcement. He said to the them, 'I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom.'

In English, *confer* means 'to bestow upon as a gift.' The Greek word used by Luke can mean 'to make a covenant' or 'assign by a will.' Jesus is assigning to the disciples a share in God's kingdom, which will become theirs when he dies.

This special future honor notwithstanding, they will still be tested right now, and their failure to pray might be a sign that they are unprepared for what comes next. Jesus has done his best to tell them how it's going to be. They're to be counted among the lawless for following him, and yet they continue to do so.

Then Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray. It was from the Mount of Olives, from the spot where tradition says the Messiah would appear, that Jesus entered the city riding along a path on a young colt. The people who met him were singing Psalm 118, a song of deliverance that God will rescue those who rejoice and give thanks to God.

So, we have two separate kingdoms. We have Caesar's kingdom and God's kingdom, the same now as it was then. One is based on power and domination and the other is based on justice, mercy, and the love of God. Jesus refused to accept Caesar's kingdom, back in the wilderness, when Satan first tried to tempt him.

If we choose to be silent and enable Caesar's kingdom to rule over us, Jesus reminds us that truth will not be silenced for long. Maybe the trial – or temptation – that Jesus warned us about is choosing to go along with whatever Caesar wants because it's easier and safer rather than choosing God's kingdom in a dangerous world.

Deciding which kingdom to choose for ourselves becomes a question of faith. Everyone Jesus called to follow him did so immediately and was tested later. Some failed spectacularly, like Judas, while others, like Peter, failed but made a comeback.

We are not yet at Good Friday, nor are we at Easter. We know what's coming though, in a way that Jesus' followers did not. For them, Jesus' hour had come, and they had no hope. It would be a long time before anyone connected Jesus with Isaiah's Suffering Servant. But it would only be a few days before they realized that the tomb had no hold over Jesus, that death was not final, and that we might know God through Jesus.

Amen.

¹ Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 156.