

3 24 24**Set His Face Like Flint****Isaiah 50:4-10; Mark 11:1-11**

In many congregations, Palm Sunday is actually Passion Sunday – a day in which worshippers recount the story of the trial, conviction, sentencing and crucifixion of Jesus. Take note that I am preaching today only about the day Jesus entered Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), with the assumption that you will be here on Good Friday when we will hear the passion story. I heard of one church that actually requires congregants to bring their Good Friday bulletin with them to Easter morning worship as their ticket to get in. In other words, they don't get to celebrate Easter resurrection unless they commemorate the crucifixion first. Just sayin', I hope you come to the 6pm service on Friday.

Now that we're all on the same Palm Sunday page, let's take a run-up to who it is the Hebrew people perceive is coming into the city at the time of Passover. Those who worship in the temple know the 50th chapter of the prophet Isaiah as an account of the coming servant of the Lord who, even though he is reviled, rejected and abandoned, will usher in the Kingdom of God. The servant is interpreted to be any number of individuals. As Christians, we often (or maybe, exclusively) think of the servant as Jesus the Messiah. For the Jews living in exile in Babylon, it was much more poignant to imagine the servant as being the people of Yahweh – the chosen people of the Hebrew faith who were reviled, rejected, exiled and enslaved. The people as a whole were the ones intended to bring in God's kingdom and be lifted up out of despair.

The prophet Isaiah was, in this scenario, quite encouraging. He wanted to replace or reframe the story of the Hebrew people as a group that had lost its land and identity as a people, and tell a new story of how they are the very ones who are serving God with dignity and purpose. The coming Servant in Isaiah was in their midst already, in the second century, before the birth of

Jesus. The coming Servant had already arrived and would rise up to serve God and bring others along with them.

This is pretty humbling for those who believe Isaiah was prophesying the coming of the Messiah who we identify as Jesus. The prophecy was about not just one servant, but a whole community of servants empowered to bring in the kingdom of love for enemies, forgiveness of oppressors and destruction of all hierarchies.

How might we tell this story of Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem if not as the story of the arrival of the Christ, the savior, the king? What if Jesus were one of many throughout history to usher in the kingdom whose reign is God's and God's alone?

As one of many called to lead others into the kingdom, Jesus had to steel himself to go where he needed to go. You and I know what that's like! We steel ourselves to have difficult conversations; we steel ourselves for a job interview, or to drive for the first time, or to choose to have or not have children. The prophet Isaiah said that the servant had to set his face like flint. Jesus did just that: he first steeled himself, and then began the journey to Jerusalem.

It's hardly likely that he would have to set his face like flint in order to be received by the people shouting Hosanna! This is not a moment worthy of steeling yourself. Perhaps the crowds were a complete surprise. What a relief that must have been. One moment Jesus is all tensed up, bracing himself for the religious and political powers of Jerusalem to challenge him and probably arrest him for sedition, and the next moment he is warmly welcomed by the very people with whom he most wants to share good news. A moment of respite. An oasis of honey in the midst of locusts. A reminder of love and grace

even in the context of confusion, power-grabbing and distortions of faith. Maybe this journey to Jerusalem wouldn't be as bad as he thought. Maybe...

The procession ended, the palms were trampled, and the crowds with their enthusiastic Hosannas dissipated. The writer of Mark's gospel doesn't waste words. Jesus went into the Temple and looked around. Not an ordinary looking, but looking around, taking it all in, assessing the situation, sorting things out in his head, soaking up the clues of who was there and who wasn't there, sensing what had gone on that day and what was ahead tomorrow – Jesus looked, saw and understood all the dynamics of the temple and what was needed of him.

In our restorative work together, we are called upon to step into the life of our own congregation with new eyes and look around. We are called to take it in, assess and sort things out. I suspect that for some of us, we need to set our faces like flint in order to do that. Today there may be some inner bracing going on before venturing in to talk about things like overt and covert values. And in the process of steeling ourselves, there is the risk of walling ourselves off, or at the very least there is a hesitance to share what we are thinking and feeling deeply. The word *risk* is important here. It is risky to express our truths – exactly the risk Jesus took in going to Jerusalem to tell the truth to the religious and political powers overseeing the Hebrew people.

Yet this is what is being asked of us as the people of God. We are the servants of God described in the prophet Isaiah. We feel as though we are walking in darkness, but that is the furthest thing from the truth. In the darkness of our individual angst is the guiding light of God who fully intends to use us for the Good, and give us dignity and purpose. We, the servants of

God, come to the temple and look around. Like Jesus we will see and understand all the dynamics; we will see and understand what is needed of us.

And we will find unlikely celebration in the midst of it all. No matter how challenging our conversations, there will be simultaneous oases of lifting up all that is Good in our midst, and rightly so! Stepping into the life of our congregation there *is* cause for celebration. There will be palms, there will be praises and there will be pancakes!

As we follow the path of Jesus from the palms to the place of worship, we must also follow him outside of the city to Bethany. The fullness and contrasts of that Palm Sunday called for respite from it all. Bethany was a place of restoration, to let down, to enjoy a meal and to put away the flint and steel. You and I are invited into all of these holy spaces this week. You and I are invited to celebrate, to look around, to relax, to set our faces like flint, to face the consequences of truth-telling, and to rise again in new life as the resurrected people of God.

Amen.

Isaiah 50:4-10

The Lord God has given me

the tongue of a teacher,

that I may know how to sustain

the weary with a word.

Morning by morning God wakens—

wakens my ear

to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear,

and I was not rebellious,

I did not turn backwards.

I gave my back to those who struck me,

and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face

from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;

therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like flint,

and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

the God who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

It is the Lord God who helps me;

who will declare me guilty?

All of them will wear out like a garment;

the moth will eat them up.

Who among you fear the Lord

and obey the voice of this servant,

who walks in darkness

and has no light,

yet trusts in the name of the Lord

and relies upon God?

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.