

“On the journey to the cross”

1. It was back a few weeks ago, when we were talking about the Transfiguration that Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, and brothers James and John up to a mountain.
  - a. And there he was transfigured and joined momentarily by Moses and Elijah. Remember?
  - b. And literally and figuratively, from that mountain top, he set his course to Jerusalem.
  - c. From that moment, he was on the journey to the cross.
  - d. The disciples either didn't understand it or they pondered if Jesus, always talking in parables, may be still using some convoluted story to tell them his message.
  - e. As they approached Jerusalem, the final events of what we now call Holy Week unfolded.
2. Today, Palm Sunday, began going up to Jerusalem, first down into the valley and then up the little hill on which Jerusalem sits surrounded by a protecting wall.
  - a. Up the winding road they went and entered through one of the several city gates.
  - b. The city was abuzz because of the upcoming Passover festival (it was one of the main Jewish religious celebrations at the Temple of Solomon in the middle of the city).
    - i. The occupying Roman army would have been on high alert, because Passover was a festival celebrating freedom of Hebrew slaves from Egypt.
    - ii. So you can see how some of the Jewish people would get antsy and yearn for release from the yoke of Rome.
    - iii. More than once insurrections had started and been brutally quelled by the Romans.
    - iv. Passover seemed a likely moment for that to happen again.
    - v. So the air was tense with religious fervor and militaristic anticipation.
  - c. And Jesus that day chose to make his entrance into the city not on a warrior's horse, but on a humble donkey.
    - i. The crowds (not just his disciples), convinced that this was the start of something big, received Jesus as if he were a returning, conquering hero.
    - ii. Here we go! They thought. Hosanna! Save us!
  - d. It seemed like an auspicious beginning.
    - i. Weren't all the pieces in place?
    - ii. This might be the week!
    - iii. A Holy Week of victory for God's people as Passover approached that Sabbath!

- e. But you and I know that's not how it would shake out. Instead of crowning him as Prince, they would eventually arrest him as prisoner.
3. Today's passages give us short glimpses. First Sunday. Now Thursday after his "Last Supper."
- a. That Thursday evening goes late into the night and he and his disciples go up the Garden of Gethsemane, across the valley from Jerusalem,
    - i. and he leaves most of the disciples at one spot, and once again it's Jesus with Peter, James and John, going up farther still.
    - ii. They were his closest followers.
    - iii. He has told them what would happen next, and yet they were still disconnected from that reality.
    - iv. We hear Jesus at his most human, praying to God to maybe let this tragedy pass him by.
    - v. But not what I want, he prays, but what you want, God.
    - vi. He had left the three praying, but they were not shaken to the core as Jesus was.
    - vii. They fall asleep. Again and again.
    - viii. Until Judas appears through the darkness and directs the police to arrest him.
  - b. Some twelve hours later, after being wrongly accused and convicted, Jesus would be dead on a cross.
4. Why didn't God answer Jesus' prayer? Did he have to die? Could this terrible ordeal have been postponed or canceled?
- a. For centuries since that tragic week, believers have asked themselves some version of those questions.
  - b. For some, it has made sense that, since Moses ordered that a lamb would be sacrificed at Passover, that Jesus being murdered was as if he took the place of that lamb to signify freedom for all people.
  - c. For some, it has made sense that the very son of God was bringing the people back to God, as a prophet who lays it all on the line in the face of death threats (as did Elijah), yet he pushed the storyline to the limit and his death was a tragic injustice at the hands of a sinful oppressor.
  - d. For some, later still, his death was seen as having mostly spiritual significance, Jesus taking the sins of the world on his shoulders.
  - e. Other see in his death the ultimate sense of solidarity that God could have with us, suffering as we do, even to the point of death
  - f. Spoiler alert: This story is incomplete, of course.
    - i. Death will not have the last word.
    - ii. As we enter this Holy Week, with its ups and downs, it calls us to stand in the suspense, in the discomfort of injustice, in the disappointment of

deserting disciples, in the torturous silence of the day after the crucifixion.

5. We stand in that tension because we need to know Jesus was like one of us back then,
  - a. and so by faith we affirm that Jesus stands alongside us today,
  - b. when oppressive systems push people to the margins or to their unjust deaths,
  - c. when it feels like God might not be listening,
  - d. when all we can see is a dead end and no way out.
6. Our journey to the cross is to remember his cross, and to remind us his cross wasn't the end. His cross wasn't the end. His cross wasn't the end.