

Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 118
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 21: 1-11

Palm Sunday A
St Thomas, Medina
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Learning to Stay

So... how's Lent been for you? Has it felt very Lent-ish? Were you diligent in prayer and fasting and almsgiving? Did you take something up, or leave something behind? Did you allow the season to work on you? Were you actually aware that it was Lent? Whether Lent was deeply meaningful, or 40 days just like any other 40 days, it has come to an end. Ready or not, today we'll turn from Lent to Holy Week, the most beautiful, dramatic and transformative week of the year for Christians. A week that will change our lives if we let it. But I'm jumping ahead.

The Gospel stories we've heard throughout Lent have all been about recognizing Jesus. Do you remember the Samaritan woman at the well who told her neighbors to *"Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"* John 4:29. Or the man born blind who exclaimed *"Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."* John 9:32-33. And just last Sunday, we heard Jesus tell Martha that *"...everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,"* then asked her *"Do you believe this?"* She said to him, *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."* John 11: 26-27. Whether or not we've kept up Lenten disciplines, the scriptures have been preparing us for this day and for the week ahead. We've come to recognize Jesus through the stories of his encounters with all sorts of people. He has been revealed as the Messiah, the Holy one of God, the one who has come to save the world, and he's not just been revealed to the people in the stories. He's been revealed to us too. No wonder there's a big parade. It's the Messiah, the one everyone's been waiting for!

The story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is one of those stories we think we know so well, don't we? After all, we hear it every year. But what if there were something new for us in this story? What if we could see the story through fresh eyes? What if we could set aside the paintings and frescoes and images we've seen through the years, and imagine ourselves as part of the growing crowd? This winter, I had the opportunity to walk along the path that Jesus rode that day, and I assure you, the story became very new, very present and very real for me. As we began our journey, everyone seemed to go inside themselves. All conversation stopped as we walked along that dusty road. I could almost hear the Hosannas being shouted, feel the press of the people trying to get a closer look, sense the crowd being whipped into a frenzy of power-fueled excitement. I'm sure some of those people didn't even know who Jesus was, but they probably couldn't help getting caught up in the excitement of it all. Everything they had hoped for seemed to be right there in front of them. The energy on that road is still palpable.

The people who lined the road and threw down their coats at that long-ago Palm Sunday parade had waited a very long time for the promised Messiah, and they thought they had a pretty good

idea of who he would be. They expected a mighty King, one who would overthrow the Roman occupiers, seize political power and bring back the good life from the time when King David ruled the land. And they did get a king. He just didn't turn out to be the kind of king they had expected.

Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him... That's the kind of king he was. And as he rode into Jerusalem, he brought the power of God's love as his only weapon. It was a confusing time, a tumultuous time, and while it all seemed really exciting, it was a very, very scary time. Jesus threatened both the political and religious rulers of his time because the law he taught was the law of love. And the law of love doesn't recognize the sort of power the occupying government wielded. The law of love doesn't recognize power that allows a few to have much and most to have little, doesn't recognize power that sets people against one another because they don't look like each other or think like each other or because they call God by a different name. The law of love is the law that recognizes each and every human being as God's own beloved. Jesus is just as threatening today as he was then. His power, the power of God's boundless love, is the only power that can overthrow the hatred and injustice that is stirred up when self-serving powers employ scare tactics to set us against one another. The power of love is the only power that can soften hardened hearts and heal heartsick and weary souls. It is stronger than hate, stronger than rage, stronger than money or power or prestige or privilege. The power of love is stronger even than death.

This is our story, and it all unfolds in the coming week. I know it can be tempting to want to skip the hard parts, to delight in the Palm Sunday parade and then tomorrow just go back to school or back to work and back to our ordinary lives. It's tempting to want to skip straight through to Easter, when we can join another parade, this time shouting Alleluia, He is risen!

But oh my dears, what a poverty it is not to immerse ourselves in everything that happens in between the Hosannas and the Alleluias.

I understand our reluctance to walk with Jesus' through this last and most holy week of his life. There is enough suffering in the "real world" we say, I don't want to go through suffering for the sake of suffering. And if it were suffering for the sake of suffering, I wouldn't go either. But none of Jesus life, and not even his death was for the sake of suffering.

It was all for the sake of love. For love of God and for love of us. Each one of us. It was for the love of this very community, just as much as it was for the love of his father and his mother and the disciples and all those people he had walked with, throughout his too-short life.

When we make the journey through holy week together, when we allow ourselves to fully enter into each one of the beautiful and moving liturgies, we will come to the Easter resurrection filled with a joy that is unimaginable to those who came directly from the Palm Sunday parade.

Don't wait until next Sunday to come back! Come to church tomorrow night and begin Holy Week by letting go of your burdens in our service of healing and reconciliation. Contemplation, beautiful music, and the opportunity to offer up all of your hurts and heartaches to the God who loves you more than life itself await you.

On Tuesday night there is a very special service just for youth, an exploration of the last week of Jesus' life, and the experience of his glorious resurrection.

Bring your whole family on Maundy Thursday when we will have supper together, sharing communion at table with our friends just as Jesus did on that last night with his. Hear his words as he reminds us that unless we humble ourselves enough to let him wash our feet, we can have no part in him. Come to the garden, hear the story of his arrest, stay with him in the chapel to keep watch.

And don't be afraid to come back on Friday, that most difficult day we call "good..." You will feel the greatest love of all that day, palpable in the story of the God who chose to experience every single aspect of what it is to be human.

And when with God's friends, we have walked alongside Jesus, feeling the love of deep friendship, the heartache of betrayal, the seeming loss of everything that is good, we will come to the Easter Vigil knowing that God is in absolutely everything with us and that love always, always wins. Our Easter Vigil is for the whole family! Come huddle around the fire, hear the ancient stories, bring your pots and pans and noisemakers and experience the thrill of the very first Eucharist of Easter. The joy of resurrection experienced in the Easter Vigil is like nothing else.

The events of Holy Week are not easy. They weren't easy for Jesus and his friends, and they aren't easy for us. Yet Holy Week embodies all of our questions, all of our suffering, all of our heartaches and all of our joy. Holy Week helps us to see God at work in every aspect of our lives, not waving a magic wand to disappear the sadness, but making meaning out of everything we experience and turning everything, finally, into love.

You see, God isn't with us only on Sundays. In Holy Week, just as in every other week of our very real lives, God is present and calling and loving and making meaning in all of the Monday through Saturday in-between times too. Join us on the journey and find your place in God's great story. Walk with Jesus through this last week of his life. It's a journey like no other, and it just might change you forever.

Amen.