

# “Our House”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 25, 2018*

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent / Palm Sunday

Rev. John Wahl

John 12:12-16

Matthew 7:24-29

On this particular day, Palm Sunday, we celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, descending from the Mount of Olives while the crowds greet him with waving palm fronds and shouts of “Hosanna!” Here, the events of Holy Week are set into motion, and only a few short days later, the people in the crowds will have either turned away from Jesus, or turned against him as he is arrested, judged and sent to the cross to die. Out of the violent darkness of Good Friday, the Son will literally rise again on Easter morning with the discovery of an empty tomb; showing that death could not hold this man, Jesus, who had come in the name of the Lord.

As triumphal as the Palm Sunday parade might have been, that celebratory mood in Jerusalem did not last long. Though the crowds there lauded Jesus as their long-awaited king, something in the next few days happened to change their minds; or, to assault their confidence with fear.

Jesus was coming to Jerusalem for the occasion of the Passover, and on Thursday of that week, he would gather with his disciples in an upper room to share with them this sacred meal. But he was far from alone in his journey. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would travel to the holy city to celebrate Passover at the Temple; and Jerusalem’s population would swell to nearly twice its normal size. This is how Marcus Borg and John Crossan imagine it:

*Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year...One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God and his followers came from the peasant class...On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Pilate proclaimed the power of empire.<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the most unmilitary mount imaginable, a female donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her. The one who comes in without military pretense brings a message of nonviolence and peace. Pilate, the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Borg and Crossan, *The First Week*, “Day One”

governor, arrives in a military parade, surrounded by his soldiers who would carry out the violence against Jesus. It seemed for a while that the one with the power of the empire had won; until, that is, the tomb was found empty.

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been reading from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. We have listened to Jesus' message of turning the world's expectations and priorities upside down; how the hungry, the mourning, the persecuted and the peacemakers will be blessed; how God's good gifts of salt and light are meant to be shared, not hidden; how we are to move beyond the letter of the Law and embrace its spirit, by turning the other cheek, by giving freely to those who have need, by loving our enemies as well as our neighbors; and, finally, how we are to act and pray not to bring attention to ourselves, but in service to God and others.

Today, we look at the final verses of the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus concludes his instructions about how we are to live as members of a community of faith; telling a story of two people and the houses they have chosen to build. The building is a metaphor to describe life: one person hears Jesus' words and acts on them, putting them into practice. The other hears Jesus' words and doesn't act on them. Two people, two different responses to Jesus' message. The first person is like a house that has been built on a rock. Its foundation is strong and secure and can withstand any assault. The second is like a house built on sand; its foundation is weak and unstable and will eventually be destroyed by the storm.<sup>2</sup>

What is the crucial difference between the one builder who is wise and the other who is foolish? It has nothing to do with the things that we usually associate with wisdom: experience, insight and experience. Nor does it have to do with hearing what Jesus has said: both men do. The difference, Jesus says, between being either wise or foolish is acting or not acting. Therefore, it appears, it is not enough for us to hear the words of Jesus; to study them, or to be inspired by them, or to dream about what may happen because of them. We must act on them, practice them, live them out in our lives.<sup>3</sup> Before the storm hits, before the forecast turns gray, we must begin to construct our house on this rock-solid foundation.

This final story effectively summarizes the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is not suggesting that a new Law replace the old; rather, that love for and devotion to God must be accompanied by a life that honors God in prayer and action. Or, to put it another way, following Jesus means choosing to become a member of his kingdom, marked by a willingness to live life according to values and beliefs that can sometimes seem backwards or upside-down. Jesus invites us to an encounter with God in a different way

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Beaton from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>3</sup> David Ewart from "Holy Textures"

of living life, into a house which is built on the kind of foundation that provides strength to withstand the storms.

Four years ago, when a few of us from this church visited Jerusalem, we walked the Palm Sunday pathway down from the Mount of Olives, and past the Church of all Nations, which is located on the site of the Garden of Gethsemane. The pilgrims who had gathered in the modern holy city also waved palm branches in a celebratory re-creation of that triumphal entry almost 2000 years before. And yet, it was impossible to forget how tensely divided Jerusalem was then, and is today; how we saw checkpoints at every gate and military guards on most corners.

We live in a violent world; the marches that took place around the country are reminders of that sad fact. As loud as cries of peace might be, they are met with calls for greater military strength to keep us safe. As Christians, we live with our feet in two different worlds; the faith community into which Jesus calls us, as well as the political, economic and cultural society in which we already dwell. We see the very different parades coming from the east and the west.

And so, Jesus asks us – in this concluding portion of the Sermon on the Mount – to think about where we will build our house. Will it be on a foundation of rock or sand? When the winds blow and the waters rise, will our house stand or will it fall?

In the body of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowds that have gathered to hear him that practicing their faith will make the difference in how strong their faith will be; that it is when they act as a community, and on behalf of others – rather than in self-interest – that they will construct life on a solid foundation. Faith, he is teaching them, is the same for all seasons; good times and bad, sunny days of happiness and hope as well as the dreary winter days of fear, infirmity and death. Faith is about integrity; is our character – public and private, personal and professional, in worship and in work – consistent: do we say what we do, and do what we say?<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes, Jesus tells us, this means that we might need to go inside and close the door in order to pray, so that we will not be distracted from our focus on God and each other. Other times, he says, we might need to give as if one hand does not know what the other is doing, so as not to hold back anything we have to offer. We are, he says, to be salt and light for the world; this is our common and current calling and identity; it is who we are, now. Not somebody else, or some day when we are better equipped, or when there are more people signed up, or all of the obstacles have been removed. Jesus announces that the kingdom of God, his rule and reign, the upside-down and backwards ways that he is revealing, are at hand; already but not fully here; and, so, we are called to take part; to pray and act in faith as it comes to be.

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<sup>4</sup> James Bratcher, "Faith for All Seasons" from *DayOne.org*

People of God, this is our house; built and shared with God and for our neighbors near and far. As we near the end of our Lenten journey to the cross and beyond, let us remember how truly blessed we and our house are when we act and pray with integrity and faith. AMEN.