

**SOUL RESET:
Living In The Light**

Matthew 21:1-11

Sometimes the worst can lead to the best.

A sermon preached by
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Before I went to work one day this week, Carey made a remark about the way I was dressed. It was Thursday, so I had no appointments or Zoom meetings on the schedule. For the third day in the week, I was wearing blue jeans to work. I normally don't wear blue jeans to work unless I have no appointments. She said, "So is this casual week?" She was not being critical, just kidding with me.

I said, "At least I'm not in my pajamas. I'm just trying to maintain the illusion of normalcy."

It's been really weird around the church. For the last two weeks, most of the staff has been working from home, except me and the maintenance crew. I can maintain social distance because I am the only one in the office most of the time. But to keep my sanity, I have been getting up at the usual time, getting dressed, and going to work, just like normal. And because we are doing almost everything differently, my days have been as full as usual. It's an illusion, I know. Nothing is normal. Or rather, there is a new normal that we are all trying to learn.

The coronavirus pandemic will not last forever. In a relatively short amount of time, a few weeks or months, it will be in the rear-view mirror. But the effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting. This will change our lives, our community, our church, our nation, and our world. This will be a 9/11 type of historical event.

There are at least two ways to respond to this new normal. We can dissolve in anxiety and despair, because things will never be the same again. Or we can approach this new normal with the excitement of a new challenge, because things will never be the same again.

There's an old story about a shoe salesman who was sent by his company to open up a sales office in a third world country. After three months, his sales were dismal, and he wrote back to his corporate office, "This was a bad idea. Sales are terrible. Nobody here wears shoes."

So the company called the salesman back to the U. S. and sent another guy over to phase out and close down. But all of a sudden, they began to get orders for shoes. The second month was better than the first month, and the third month was better than the second. The bosses sent a message to

the new salesman, “What’s going on over there?” He wrote back, “This was a great idea. Sales are phenomenal. Nobody here wears shoes!”

Things will never be the same again; is that a disaster or an opportunity? What can God do with this moment? This is an earth-shaking, paradigm-shifting time for the church and the world. What an incredible, challenging, and even amazing time to be the people of God!

There are some parallels between our historical moment and Palm Sunday. That, too, was the start of a week that changed the world. Nothing was ever the same after Jesus entered Jerusalem that day. We are still waving palm branches 2000 years later.

In the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Jesus only comes to Jerusalem once after his ministry begins. It is his date with destiny. After his teaching and working of miracles in Galilee, his fame preceded him. Crowds followed him along the road. They lined the streets as he came through Jericho. When he got to Bethphage, about four miles east of Jerusalem, he had his disciples commandeer a donkey for him to ride. There was a reason for this, and it wasn’t because Jesus was tired. The prophet Zechariah had predicted that when the King came to Jerusalem, he would ride not a magnificent war-horse, but a humble donkey: “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*”¹

The author of Matthew apparently didn’t understand how the Hebrew Bible speaks in parallelism, so he thought Jesus rode in on two animals. But this was not a circus act, it was a political statement. Here comes the King! When the entourage of Jesus got to the Mount of Olives, the city of Jerusalem spread out before them, just across the Kidron Valley. The gate on that side of the Temple Mount is the Eastern Gate. The belief was that when the Messiah came, he would enter Jerusalem through that gate. (It was bricked up by the Muslims when they took over the Temple Mount centuries ago, but when Jesus came, the gate was open.) There was no mistaking what Jesus was claiming. The crowd shouted it, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*”²

Nobody could ignore what was happening, especially the Roman colonial government in Jerusalem and the leaders of the Jews who had forged a partnership with the Romans. Was this the real Messiah, the true King of Israel? It was a new day in Jerusalem; the whole city was in an uproar. There was a new normal. Things would never be the same again.

When Jesus comes, nothing is ever the same again. That applies to Jerusalem, and that applies to the human heart. When Jesus enters our hearts and claims our spirit, everything changes, forever, and for good.

Jarena Lee was the first woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition, and I love the story of her conversion. Jarena was a slave in Philadelphia in the early years of the 19th century. She worked with a cook who was a Methodist, and the woman took Jarena to hear Richard Allen, the founder of the AME church. She felt drawn to the Methodists, and when Bishop Allen gave the invitation, Jarena became a “trial member” of the church.

Three weeks later, as Allen was beginning to preach, Jarena felt her soul “gloriously converted.” She had a vision of a sin in the middle of her heart, the sin of malice and resentment toward someone who had hurt her deeply. She said in her heart, “Lord, I forgive every creature.”

In her autobiography, Lee wrote,

That instant it appeared to me as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person even to my fingers' ends, split at the crown of my head and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow from my sight--when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead. That moment, though hundreds were present, I did leap to my feet and declare that God, for Christ's sake, had pardoned the sins of my soul. Great was the ecstasy of my mind, for I felt that not only the sin of malice was pardoned, but all other sins were swept away together.

That day was the first when my heart had believed and my tongue had made confession unto salvation. The first words uttered, a part of that song which shall fill eternity with its sound, was "Glory to God!" For a few moments, I had power to exhort sinners and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of him who had clothed me with his salvation.³

There is nothing like the sweet experience of salvation! Palm Sunday is also sweet. It is the triumphant entry of Jesus, the King and Messiah, into the Holy City of God. Things will never be the same again.

But Palm Sunday is also bittersweet, because we know the story. We know what happens the rest of the week. We know that before the week is out, Jesus will be betrayed and arrested, condemned and tortured, crucified and buried in a borrowed tomb. The great victory parade becomes a death march to Calvary. The crowds who shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David!” on Sunday scream “Crucify him!” on Friday. The dreams and hopes that everyone had when Jesus rode through the Eastern Gate lie shattered and broken on the ground at the foot of the cross.

Of course, we also know the rest of the story, too. The voices that shouted, “Crucify him!” on Friday were whispering “He is risen!” in the streets on Sunday. It got much worse for Jesus, but then it got much better.

In this particular historical moment in which we find ourselves right now, we are having a Palm Sunday moment. We have faith and hope that all will be well eventually. We know who wins the final victory. But we know that it is going to get worse—much worse—before it gets better. There is no way to hear the predictions of how many people will get sick and how many people will die and how long this pandemic curve will last without feeling some measure of fear and anxiety. We feel like the disciples must have felt going in to Good Friday. We don’t know what is happening. We don’t know what is going to happen. We feel powerless in the grip of gargantuan forces. How are we supposed to act? Here are my common-sense suggestions.

First, faithful people will take precautions. You’ve been hearing about these daily, the smart things to do to decrease your chances of getting the virus. Wash your hands all the time. Don’t touch your face if your hands are dirty. Keep at least 6 feet away from everybody but your family. Don’t gather indoors with more than 10 people. Wear a mask when you go out in public. Report if you have symptoms of fever, sore throat, or difficulty in breathing.

And no, we won’t be having church in person on Easter. It breaks my heart. I don’t think I have missed Easter in 63 years. But I’ve read the

Bible; nowhere does it call us to be foolish and irresponsible. And I'm not actually going to miss Easter after all. I hope to spend it with you right here, and you there, and Jesus will still be risen from the dead!

So be careful, and be patient. It may be a few weeks or a couple of months before this pandemic lets us gather together again. In the larger scheme of our lives, it is a short interruption. We have grown accustomed to convenience, and we hate it when we don't have it easy. I have actually felt anger rising in me because the grocery shelves aren't stocked or services aren't available. But then, I'm a sinner! Let all that frustration go for a while, and exercise some patience through this time of hardship.

Finally, use the time well. As I said, and I'm sure many of you are experiencing the same thing, my workload has not decreased, it is just different. But for many of us, we now have some time on our hands. You can only binge watch Netflix for so long. How do we salvage our situation?

What if we binged on prayer and Scripture during our exile to our couches? The King of Kings is better than the "Tiger King." Use some of the time to be in communion with God. There are lots of people and situations to pray for. Read or watch things that lift your spirits and fill your soul. We bought a church subscription to a library of United Methodist Christian Education videos called Amplify. The code was in the email for this weekend. Pastor Roy Beth or Elizabeth Thames can help you get on if you have trouble. A good use of this time would be to build your discipleship.

Another good use of time is to keep making connections with people—through text or phone or email or even snail mail. Can you imagine writing letters to your loved ones? That's a lost art! If someone needs help, figure out a way to help them. Let the church help if we can. What has kept my hope alive this week is hearing story after story of people reaching out to take groceries to people, to feed kids, to comfort the medical personnel, police and first responders. There are good things happening in the midst of the crisis.

Friends, we can salvage this situation. We can redeem the time. We can come through this crazy experience stronger as a community, as a church, and as disciples of Jesus. How do I know that? Because I know how God

salvaged Holy Week. Things went south for Jesus from Sunday on until he said, "It is finished!" and breathed his last. Then God went to work. In three days, God saved the day. God saved the planet. God made it better than it was. Because our God is a God of resurrection. Our God is a God of salvation. Our God is a God who specializes in bringing good out of evil.

God will do God's work on the coronavirus pandemic. Through the doctors and the health professionals and our leaders and our first responders and through ordinary people like you and me, God will bring us through. There will be pain for millions of people who get sick or lose loved ones to the COVID-19. There is no getting around the pain of life. It's like the pain of the cross. But God will bring a new day. God will give us hope for tomorrow. God will make it right eventually.

The watchword for this pandemic has been "We are all in this together." And we are. But "we" and "all" include God. We are all in this together, and God is in this with us. That's no illusion of normalcy. That is the truth, and that is our hope.

We've been talking this season of Lent about getting a "Soul Reset." If ever we needed a reset for our soul, it is now. I hope you have learned some strategies for achieving your soul reset as you approach Easter this year. We learned to examine our own soul for the ways we need to improve and restart. We talked about dealing with depression and exhaustion. We touched on taking care of your body as a way of taking care of your soul. And last week we talked about dealing with the major griefs of life. In all of this we have learned that there is no illusion of normalcy. We all fail; we fall short; we take one step forward and three steps back all the time. But God gives us a chance to reset, renew, and break through our problems to get to a new day and a better way.

So the final spiritual practice we want to share with you today is Confession. As we approach Easter, during this Holy Week, let's spend time cleansing our hearts before God. As you spend time in prayer this week, write out a prayer of confession each day. Confess your fears, your failures, your weaknesses, your doubts. Lay them all at the foot of the cross, because the cross is right in front of us this week. And Jesus will take them all, all your confessions, and they will be forgiven.

As we close this day and this series, hear the promise again that God gives to each of us: *“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me, and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”*⁴ May you live lightly and freely in the unforced rhythms of grace, and God will bless you and keep you safe. Amen.

Spiritual Practice: Soul Reset, Week 6

CONFESSION

We can approach the throne of grace unashamed, but we still should do so in humility and with confession on our lips. In your quiet time read these words:

O righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, see me as I fall down before you. Forgive my unfaithfulness in not having done your will, for you have promised mercy to me if I turn to you with my whole heart. God, you require that I shall put away all idols that distract me from you. I here from the bottom of my heart renounce them all. I have turned my love toward the world, but in your power I will turn away from all temptations that will lead me from you. For my own righteousness is riddled with sin, I am unable to stand before you. Through Christ, you have offered to be my God again. Jesus, I do here on bended knees accept Christ as the only new and living Way. Amen.

Each day this week, write a short prayer of confession. Consider the idols, or sins in your life, that distract you from living fully in God. Ask God to forgive you for that thing and then let it go. Know that it is gone and forgotten. Then, do all in God’s power not to pick it back up again.

¹ Zechariah 9:9

² Matthew 21:9.

³ "Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders-Untamed Faith on America's Early Frontier," *Christian History*, no. 45.

⁴ Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*.