



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
5 April 2020
Sermon: Jesus Rides through a Pandemic
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴The Lord God has given me

the tongue of a teacher,^[a]

that I may know how to sustain

the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—

wakens my ear

to listen as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord God has opened my ear,

and I was not rebellious,

I did not turn backward.

⁶I 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.

⁷The 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;

⁸ he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord God who helps me;

who will declare me guilty?

Matthew 21:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Cathartic moments come to me unexpectedly these days, like when my eyes welled with tears last week scrolling through Facebook. One of our minister colleagues had posted a gif of the late comedian Chris Farley on his entrance to the Late Show back in the 90s.¹ The doors fly open from the back of the auditorium, and Farley, this larger than life persona with boundless energy, bursts upon a full audience. He descends the stairs, and he’s hugging, he’s high fiving, he’s giving chest bumps. He’s like a tornado of joy, reaching out to every person he can touch, connecting with some fifty people or more in the span of ten

¹ The Late Show with David Letterman. “Chris Farley – Greatest Entrance Ever.” Filmed 1996. YouTube, 4:21. Posted by Mytalkshowheroes, July 29, 2018. https://youtu.be/_z9kdqDwA80.

seconds. He shirt tail comes undone; his hair flies all around; and on his face is just the biggest smile you can imagine. Again, this was a pastor friend who posted this video of Farley celebrating life in such an over the top fashion, and below it read a simple joke: “This will be every preacher the first Sunday back after corona.” It’s silly, but just thinking about, dreaming of being with you all again in person, not through a computer, made me well up in hope and nostalgia, longing and lament.

And, just for that mundane moment, scrolling on my computer – I see Christ, entering the pandemic²; he’s there, in a flash of hope and connection, during the time of COVID-19.

You can miss him, though. You all already know the familiar interpretation of Palm Sunday: the crowds miss Jesus. Even as they celebrate his arrival, they get it wrong. The masses greet him with cheers full of Messianic expectations, “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” but they are fickle. In less than a week’s time, they also shout “Crucify him,” because when they cheered, they were expecting a conquering military hero, coming to overthrow their Roman occupiers, not a Christ headed to the cross. You can miss Jesus, even when you are laying palms down at his feet.

But, if you look closer, you see, even the most faithful of witnesses can miss Jesus too. The Gospels of Matthew and John disagree on how Jesus rides to Jerusalem. John has him riding in on a donkey, while Matthew has him awkwardly straddling two animals: a donkey and a colt, which strikes me as uncomfortable, at best. Matthew, more than any other Gospel though, wants to present Jesus as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophesy, so he

² This line, which I repeat throughout, was inspired by David Davis’s wonderful sermon on Luke 4 about Jesus passing through the crowd. See David Davis. “From Oppression to Liberation.” March 8, 2020. Nassau Presbyterian Church. <http://nassauchurch.org/from-oppression-to-liberation/>

writes this odd detail about the entrance to fulfill a verse in Zachariah, which Matthew quotes in verse 5: “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Such repetitions are common in Hebrew poetry; they make the prophesy more vivid, but Zachariah does it to make a point, not to be taken literally. So, Matthew either mistakes the poet’s intent, or he takes the same poetic license in the Gospel. But there’s this odd history of interpretation now - Just go google information about Jesus riding into Jerusalem. You find all these elaborate and misguided explanations of why Jesus had to straddle two beasts of burden on the way to Jerusalem. While trying to be faithful, they miss the point of these verses. You see, Christ enters, but again, he’s easy to miss, even when you are looking right at him.³

And we’ve seen that over and over these weeks. There’s another video circulating, one that I do not recommend you go and watch, of the televangelist Kenneth Copeland trying to perform an exorcism on the coronavirus, calling it a demon and trying to cast it out in the name of Jesus. He’s screaming into the camera, his hand uplifted, his eyes squeezed shut, “In the name of Jesus...I execute judgment on you COVID19.”⁴ Needless to say, it doesn’t seem to have worked. Copeland misses how Jesus is present in the pandemic. It’s not in magical thinking and 1970s horror-movie-style exorcisms.

And Jesus is easy to miss in far more dangerous ways: a series of church pastors and evangelical college presidents kept their institutions open long after the social distancing measures were in place, because they claimed God would protect them; our leaders

³ For this exegesis, I am indebted to O. Wesley Allen Jr.’s commentary in Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A, Vol. 2. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 111-113.

⁴ Again, not recommended. But here’s the citation: Kenneth Copeland Ministries. “Judgment is Executed on Covid-19.” Filmed 2020. Posted March 20, 2020. YouTube, 2:24. <https://youtu.be/OSIrQBGFUtw>

downplayed the pandemic in the early months of this year, endangering thousands of lives because they ignored the warnings, because they thought they could talk their way out of it, because they mistakenly thought they could choose between human life and open businesses – Christ is easy to miss in the pandemic.

One of our members said something during one of our zoom Bible studies a few weeks ago that has stuck with me. At the very beginning of physical distancing, she remarked that she noticed out in public, like in grocery stores, people were keeping their heads down, not making eye contact. I've noticed that in myself. I get anxious now in the stores. I keep *my* head down. I wait for others to pass. It makes sense. But it was a good point: how is this going to change how we are together, in the months going forward. How long will it take until we are comfortable around each other again?

And yet, even in this new reality, Christ rides into the pandemic. Have you seen it? In moments when people are spaced far apart, we are also coming together in remarkable ways. Have you seen the hospital parking lot in Spain, lined with police cars, with lights flashing, and sirens blaring, for the simple reason of honoring those who risk their lives to care for the sick? Have you heard the cheers pouring out of high-rises in London and New York and in cities around this world during hospital shift changes? Closer to home, did you see the video of Grace Covenant mommas, all socially distanced in their individual cars, making a caravan going down the road, each taking a moment to shout blessings from their car windows, in order to wish one of our members happy birthday? Did you see that husband, in Alabama, who stood outside the nursing home, where his wife, who has lived with Alzheimer's disease for 17 years, now lives? Did you see them singing together, she in her hospital bed while he stands outside, belting out through the closed window. They sing

together, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me? I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”⁵ You see, Christ rides into the pandemic, not as a conquering hero, sweeping coronavirus germs away. It’s not the victory we expect of the mighty God who created heaven and earth, but it is a victory nonetheless, when the Spirit brings us together, when humanity shows up for one another in a desperate time.

And friends, times are growing desperate. It is hard to know where, but the models tell us that the weeks to come will bring the peak of infections and death to this country. We heard projections this past week that are hard to fathom. Over a thousand people a day die from the virus now in this country, and that may increase dramatically. Most of us have been touched personally by this virus. It isn’t something far off anymore. The numbers we hear are not statistics. They are here in this community; they are our neighbors, our families, ourselves.

I wanted to give you all just a quick inside-look to worship planning on Palm Sunday. You may have noticed, there’s a movement to this service and thus to the sermon. It starts out with a note of levity, palms waving, the bright cheers of children, but it turns to somberness, and darkness, and quiet. The preacher may begin with something light. Like an illusion to his favorite comedian, but by the end, the sermon turns, like when we talk about the reality of death in these days.

The service mirrors the movement of Holy Week, from parade to the cross, from celebration to death. And that’s the movement we are going to walk through as well, together. Not just liturgically, but in reality this week. We are going to hear, and we are

⁵ The non-GCPC examples come from a wonderful video: Some Good News. “Some Good News with John Krasinski Ep. 1.” Filmed 2020. Posted March 29, 2020. YouTube, 15:43. https://youtu.be/F5pgG1M_h_U

going to experience some hard, unimaginable things. But the point of Holy Week is not just the simple movement from parade to cross. The point of Holy Week is that Christ is present and with us in that movement. Present in the celebration and in the hour of death, walking with us, all the way to Good Friday and on through to the other side of it.

I want to end today with a poem. It's a hard poem to hear. This is "Global Vigil," by

Laura Hope Gill:

You Will Not Die Alone.

Though the news says this is how it happens now,
I want to tell you it isn't.

I want to tell you that if you should be one of the ones,
Who touched a doorknob or a box or who walked
Through someone else's breath

In a way – and if you should be one of the ones
In whom the virus sets off the storm

That ices the lungs

And renders you one of the ones who dies

In the hall, or in the tent in the National Park,
Or in your house because you know you are

One of the ones who won't be counted,

I want to tell you I will count you.

I and 9 billion others are thinking of you already.

We have made ceremonies for you in our minds,
Knowing it, too, could as easily be one of us.

We will stand around you as we already are,
Even as we Lysol-spray the month's groceries delivered
By a girl wearing gloves and a facemask,

Even as we scrub our hands a third time after
Some contact with the outside world,

Even as we plant another row of potatoes or spinach
Even those of us who have never planted anything before

But suddenly seem to hear the earth telling us what goes where and when
As we watch the moon switch from wane to wax and anticipate the soil
With a hose of fresh water so cool against our skin.

Even then, we think of you, we picture you where you are
In the hallway or outdoors or not even on your way to the hospital
Because you didn't even want to try. We understand that.

And we are here surrounding you as you die.

We do not know your memories.

You do not know our names.

We do not appear in any of your photographs.

We still stand around you. We will stand around you.
The living bearing witness to the dying because this is what
Being human means. We won't leave you out of this.
We won't let you go without your knowing we are standing by you.
We will be holding your hand in our hands.
We will be weeping with your last fought-for breaths.
We will breathe for you after your last breath.
You will be a part of us.
Like this, you and you and you and you and I--
Like this, we will all live through this forever.⁶

Friends, do you see it? He never comes as we expect him, and he's so easy to miss. But
Christ rides into the pandemic. Christ in your moments of hope; Christ in the community
coming together across distance; Christ in the way we are known and remembered in the
hour of our loss and death. Christ right beside you, and beside me, this Holy Week. We are
not alone. Amen.

⁶ Laura Hope-Gill. "Global Village." Posted March 30, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/laura-hope-gill/global-vigil-a-poem-by-laura-hope-gill/10157953682374550/>