

“Can We Prepare for This?”
Luke 19:28-40 & 22:35-51
Palm/Passion Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville
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Does anyone notice something different about what’s on the Chancel this morning?

What are those, up there, behind the communion table?

Palm...what? Trees?

They look too small to be trees.

We have those up every year, I don’t even know what they are.

But I’m so grateful that Michelle in our church office remembers to order these Palm...thing-a-ma-bobs every year. If it were up to me, I would forget until the last second, and then it would be too late.

You see, today is Palm Sunday.

And Palm Sunday requires a bit more preparation than just about any other Sunday.

Not only the Palm plants on the Chancel.

But the palm branches.

Those get ordered as well, but as soon as they arrive, they need to be stored somewhere cold, and then we need to make sure we can find the baskets, and then we need to tell the ushers that we’d like the ushers to offer the palms—but don’t make people take the palms, just offer them so you can have one if you want...and then give the children an opportunity to come forward during the first hymn, with a palm branch in hand, but that requires coordination as well, because Lauren is the liturgist, so she can’t lead the call to worship and be in the back with the children at the same time.

So...that's why you heard the Call to Worship from the pulpit today.

But do you see what I mean?
If it's Palm Sunday, there's a lot going on behind the scenes.
Lots of preparation.
We've got to be prepared.

But can we?
Can we truly prepare for this day?
For this week?

You know what will happen this week.
There's the betrayal of Jesus.
The arrest of Jesus.
The suffering of Jesus.
The death of Jesus.

Who among Jesus' disciples through the years can ever be prepared for this week?

The great English poet John Milton once tried to write a poem about what happens to Jesus this week.

He wrote 7 or 8 stanzas, and then he quit.
Why'd he quit?

He quit because he realized that when he was writing about the suffering of Jesus, all he could really talk about was how John Milton felt about the suffering of Jesus.

How melancholy he became.
How sad it was to read and hear the words.¹

¹ I am indebted to Dr. Fred Craddock for this reference to the poet John Milton.

He thought he was prepared.
He wasn't prepared.

Who among us can ever truly be prepared for this week?
Just look at the first disciples.

Three times in Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer and die, and on the third day rise again. Three times, the disciples fail to grasp what Jesus is saying.

All of which leads to the scene in our second text.

Today is Palm Sunday—but it's also called Passion Sunday.
From a Latin word, it doesn't just mean "intense love, intense energy"...it means "to endure, to suffer."

That's why we have our second text.
On the last night of his life, Jesus tried to prepare his disciples once again. He tells them:

"...the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one."

In other words, I'm about to die, and you're going to have to make your way forward without me, so have some essentials with you.

Bring a purse. Bring a bag. Bring a sword.
Bring a sword?
What's with the sword?

Is Jesus really telling his disciples:
Be prepared for a fight?!!
It sure sounds like Jesus is saying, "Get ready to fight!"

So when Jesus is arrested, the disciples ask him:

“Lord, should we strike with the sword?”

And one of them cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest.

That scene occurs in all four Gospels.

To which Jesus says: “No more of this!”

And Jesus heals the slave.

That part only happens in Luke’s Gospel.

But it’s still a confusing sequence.

Why bring swords if you’re not supposed to use them?

Many biblical scholars will say that it was all performative on Jesus’ part. That he had the disciples bring swords in order to fulfill a particular passage from Isaiah, one that reads:

“...he poured himself out to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many...”

Or as Luke puts it, so that he would be “counted among the lawless...”

In other words, Jesus never intended to fight.

But he needed the disciples to believe that they were going to fight.

Bring swords so that the scripture would be fulfilled, and Isaiah’s prophecy would come to pass.

Maybe that’s it.

Or maybe there’s another explanation.

Maybe Jesus could see what was coming, knew that Judas was going to betray him, knew that the authorities came to arrest him, and he truly did NOT know what he was going to do at that moment.

Maybe a part of him WAS tempted to fight.
To be the Messiah that all sorts of people wanted him to be.
Lead a revolt. Throw out the Romans!

After all, what does Jesus do on that last night in the Garden?

He prays.
He asks God to remove the cup.
And in his anguish, his sweat came down like great drops of blood.
It's not a confident Jesus.
It's a wavering Jesus.

Consider this:

What if Jesus—

despite all his teachings, all his healings,
all his prayers, all his preparation for this moment—
what if Jesus didn't actually know what he would do
when he finally reached the moment???

It's a possibility that gives me great comfort.
The possibility that *even Jesus was not entirely prepared for this moment.*

Because it means Jesus knows what it's like to me.
And he knows what it's like to be you.
How many of you like to feel prepared?

Somewhere in this room right now, a child might be on the way.
It's this couple's first child.

The anticipation is growing.
The room in the house that will serve as a nursery has been chosen.
Newly painted just last week.

The crib has been ordered.
The baby monitor purchased.
These parents are doing everything they've been told to do.

And yet...when that child arrives, what first-time parents are truly prepared for that moment? What parent knows at that moment, how that child will rearrange their priorities, and reorder their lives, and reshape their heart?

Oh, we like to be prepared.

Let me ask Marlon/the choir—how many of you like singing on Easter Sunday? How many of you would love to sing your Easter anthem by SIGHT-READING IT, no preparation, for the very first time on Easter Sunday?

If Marlon did that, there would be a mutiny, right?
I can't imagine Marlon doing something like that.

But life does things like that.

We like to be prepared.

And yet, I wonder if the moments in life and in faith that shape us the most...are NOT the ones we meticulously and carefully curate. But the ones in which we have no control. The periods of life we never planned on experiencing...when we say, I wasn't prepared for this!

I wonder if those moments shape us more than anything else.

Do you remember what happened with Madeline Albright?
Madeline Albright died three years ago now.

She was, among her many accomplishments, the first woman to serve as Secretary of State in our country. At the State of the Union Address in 1997, she led the cabinet down the aisle, members of both political parties applauding...

“It should have been a moment of unmitigated joy,” she wrote in her memoir...

“[But] It wasn’t...”
Why not?

Because something about her past had recently come to light, a history she did not know was hers. What was discovered, and what Albright had not known, was that she was Jewish, and at least three of her grandparents had died in the Holocaust.

It was only in the process of becoming Secretary of State that her family’s history was discovered by the press, and in some quarters, Albright was accused of lying—of trying to hide her true identity. It was a painful thing to have her integrity questioned.

That’s why that State of the Union was not a moment of pure happiness for her. But the accusations that she had somehow tried to hide her true identity...were simply not true.

She was born in Prague in 1937.

Her parents fled Czechoslovakia in the face of the rising Nazi power in 1939, when she was very young. And after the war, in 1948, she came as a refugee to the United States.

“As for my parents’ decision not to reveal our Jewish heritage, I can only speculate,” Albright writes. “My guess is that they...wanted to protect us. They had come to America to start a new life. The onset of McCarthyism in the 1950s might have made them uncertain about what to expect. They may have considered telling me but never found the right time.”

Fast forward almost 50 years.

In 1997, after she learned the facts about her heritage and her grandparents and was now Secretary of State, she made a visit to the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague.

She described it this way:

“Entering, you observe what appears to be fine wallpaper covering the wall, but as you get closer, you can see that the pattern is actually made up of neat black writing listing the 77,297 Czechoslovak Jews who died in the Holocaust. ...

“The Jewish officials accompanying me pointed out the names of Arnost and Olga Korbel.”

They were her grandparents’ names.

Said Albright:

“I had not foreseen that I would start visualizing my grandparents in striped concentration camp uniforms, seeing their hollow faces staring back at me.”

Just a year earlier, Albright had visited that same synagogue for the first time. But she had not yet been nominated as Secretary, and did not at that time know that her own family was named on that wall.

As she puts it:

*“A year earlier I had visited the synagogue...
It looked the same now as it had then.
It was I who had changed.”*²

Have you ever had something happen to you for which you were completely unprepared?

Of course you have.

We all have.

And we push against those moments.

Like the Boy Scouts taught me long ago, “Be prepared!”

But what if...this week, Jesus teaches us that some parts of our lives and perhaps the most important parts of our faith will always be those parts that we are never truly prepared for...

and we have to trust in God to see us through.

Can you think of any part of your life like that right now?

What would happen,

as you journey with Jesus to the cross this week,
if you took that part of your life with you—
and instead of trying to control it,
or prevent it,
you laid it down.

You laid down that broken part of your life,
and said, God...see me through.

² Madeline Albright, *Madam Secretary*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2013.

See me through.

(Amen.)