

JOURNEY TO THE CROSS, Pastor Phil Strong
Text: Luke 19:28-42
March 20, 2016



Growth Questions

“How has Jesus disappointed you? How has he failed to live up to your expectations? What did you expect? How did you develop those expectations?”

“How have you attempted to follow Christ from a safe-distance? Are there places you have already determined not to go with Jesus... places into which you will not follow him?” (circumstances, relationships, addictions, etc.)

“How would you describe your hosanna moment? Where in your life would you welcome salvation?”
[It’s a bit complicated, right?]

Teaching Notes

Allow me to front-load today’s considerations this way:

Jesus says that the self-directed, self-determined life is contradictory to the gospel; it seriously conflicts with the life for which we were created (the “way of peace”), and nothing short of a *confrontation with* and *death to* such an approach to life will suffice.

Today’s narrative inaugurates what the Christian tradition has identified as the “Passion Week”. Webster’s defines “**passion**” as ‘**a strong inclination that moves the mind and the will to action**’.

When someone is ‘passionate’, they are not easily distracted nor easily fatigued and, honestly, we’ve never seen Jesus more intentional; more focused. It’s how passion acts. “*I must go to Jerusalem...*” [Matthew 16:21]

[2 contrasting entry scenes: slides]

[first image] We often are presented with this first image which seems more sedate and subdued. This looks more like the “*holiday parade Jesus*” making balloon-animals for the kids and the disciples flinging candy from the float.

[second image] This second image, I suggest, is a better representation of what may have occurred. This has all of the makings of an uprising...a mob scene. These folks aren't interested in being divided into groups for a sack lunch and a bible story...they wanted action! They are tired, angry, running out of patience and ready to ride Jesus into town and make him King. This is Israel at the ‘tipping point’.

The atmosphere would have been particularly volatile in Jerusalem, this time of year, to say the least. The faithful masses were all converging on Jerusalem to re-enact their “freedom story”; and not just to reminisce, but to wonder aloud if this might be the year that God returns to eliminate the evil and oppression and re-establish his own kingdom and reign.

The Jews present would have been well-versed in this story of the appearing of a strange, Messianic figure who would, like Moses, come and confront the bitter oppression of the current regime and lead God's people out of enslavement and into the freedom for which they were created. “**Hosanna**” is a Hebrew word meaning “**save us now**”.

So, Jesus arrives, with his entourage, in a very deliberate and storied way. The palm branches represent the ‘poor man’s’ red-carpet welcome for a King.

“Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey -- even on a donkey's colt” (Zechariah 9:9).

Picture, now, the increased military presence on that day due to the potential for unrest: They hear the rumblings and ride out to meet the masses approaching and get a glimpse of their king. **What do they see?**

A posse that was less than intimidating: lepers, whores, rogue IRS agents, beggars--- no “**Super-Pacs**” contributing to his election fund [the lame, the lost and the losers] And, to top it off, instead of flailing his hands to incite the crowd, he's crying!

We all have our motivations for following Jesus. Many are more pragmatic than worshipful.

What life seems to do, with some regularity, is to offer circumstances which confront those motivations and challenge both the sincerity of our intentions and the reliability of our assumptions.

We hear him talking and we watch his movements and we think we understand Jesus; we think we are getting an idea as to where this whole thing is heading: we see him turning water into wine, healing the blind, providing a picnic lunch for the hungry, raising people from the dead. He is trending. His media approval ratings have never been higher. This is the God-moment we have been waiting for! This is the Kingdom coming.

“... praising God for all of the wonderful miracles they had seen...” (Luke 19:37)

Jesus has always proven great at amassing a crowd... he's just not really good at keeping the crowd! So directed were his convictions that, at times, it even proved troublesome for his followers: *“Many turned back and no longer followed...”* (John 6). *“No, thank you, Jesus.”*

I'm a bit of a **'branch-waver' myself**. I love it when Jesus finally starts acting like 'God'. I'll grab a branch and cheer for Jesus, especially when it appears that he is about to start dealing with all of the people and circumstances which are making my life miserable.

But, when he fails to live up to my expectations, I stop cheering for him. I may still be waving the branch, but in my heart, I've already abandoned him.

We realize...

...you can't have God on your own terms.

Jesus refused to allow himself to be crowned “King” under false pretenses. I would characterize it as *“being in love with God”* vs. *“being in love with the idea of God”* (e.g. before I got married, I was in love with the “idea of marriage”). All that to say, there was something about my expectation level (absence of experience) that didn't sync with reality.

...there is no “following from a safe-distance” with Jesus, only repentance and illogical self-denial.

We're often ready to follow as long as there are no real demands, few expectations, no real implications connected to my pledge of allegiance: as long as there is 'no money down' and 'no interest for (5) years'. We love “dinner-party” Jesus, but, it makes us nervous when he starts with all of the morbid language about dying to ourselves and being crucified with him.

...you can't legitimately say, “Your Kingdom come” while you are tenaciously clinging to your own!

Either you remain stubbornly committed to your self-directed way of life (my money, my vocation, my relationships, my sexuality, my dreams, my goals... my life!) or you go with Jesus into Jerusalem to die.

Jesus always has this way of disturbing the status-quo in our lives. He understands the dilemma that repentance presents to us. He is aware that, most often, we substitute real, life-transformation for adaptation and a few new coping mechanisms.

In case we are tempted to misinterpret Jesus' motivations... *"I have come that you might have life..."* (John 10:10). Let us not miss Jesus' self-declared mission statement.

At every turn, he challenges our pursuits of life, independent of God, and requires that we utterly abandon them because they are not trustworthy. He demonstrates (in his life and in his death) that the *"peace"* for which our hearts long will only come as we name all of those pursuits as 'faulty' and 'deceptive' and we "die" to them: refuse to respond to them and allow them to dictate our pursuits. Only then, Jesus insists, will we find the robust and eternal life on the other side of death.

There is a difference between believing in Jesus and sharing Jesus' beliefs.

We'll never follow our *ideas* about Jesus into Jerusalem because we soon discover that those preferences can never sustain the passion necessary to follow him into the places of abandonment and self-denial.

I'm convinced that the *"Who killed Jesus?"* or *"Why people killed Jesus"* debate is not only a journey into the context and culture of Palestine in the first century, but a journey into our own hearts.

"...some of you are trying to kill me because there is no room in your hearts for my message..." (John 8:37).

Without being able to fully develop this: the crucifixion of Jesus was not simply some careful (albeit immoral and illegal) religious or political conspiracy. It was the reaction of the disorderly (un-reformed) human heart; the result of having been exposed and the need to conceal our distorted motivation and protect our way of life.

This was kingdoms in conflict; a confrontation, not simply with policies and procedures, but with values and ethics and worldviews. And, not simply between Rome and the Jews, but between the will of God and our own kingdom: ***Whose desires will prevail? Whose passion sets the agenda for our lives?***

"Save us..." perhaps from such things as our anger; from depression; from cancer; from my substance dependence; from my porn addiction; from tension in my marriage and family; from me need to perform? from my irrational fears?

Outside of Jerusalem, Christ will die for us, Christ will die because of us, Christ will die with us, Christ will die instead of us. Then, Christ will invite you to die with him.

[Romans 5:10; Romans 6:4; Galatians 2:20; Matthew 16:24]

... so that you might really live!

Eucharist

What we are witnessing during Passion Week is a “**sacrificial**” moment. In a world that’s so fickle and ambiguous, there’s something incredibly appealing and attractive about a sacrificial life. It requires something of us; it demands difficult choices. It’s why the phrase, “**half-hearted**” is so repulsive.

Ancient covenants were typically inaugurated with a sacrifice (blood) to demonstrate the weightiness/gravity of the commitment. It says, “*I am willing to die rather than break covenant with you!*”

Sacrifice always seemed to involve the sense that humans were offering something of value to God, not just to appease him or coerce a response, but out of gratitude for his stubborn-commitment to them [although, after a time, the lines might blur a bit].

In the sacrifice, there was also the sense of identification; that somehow what was happening in the process to this seemingly innocent animal was a dramatic portrayal of their own sin and guilt.

There was a sense that because of the sacrifice, you were somehow forgiven; you were no longer identified by your sin. Atonement essentially says that God would never use your sin as an excuse not to love you.