

Who Is This?

Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on April 5, 2020

Just because we are not allowed to gather for our annual Palm Sunday procession does not mean that we are not on a journey. Just because we are, for the most part, stationary, does not mean that we are not headed somewhere. Just because there is no traffic does not mean that the road ahead is clear. Just because crowds can't gather does not mean that our minds are altogether free of distraction. Just because we are not allowed to be together does not mean that we are alone.

Brothers and sisters, we are very much on a journey, one the likes of which none of have encountered in our lifetimes. But even with that, even with the overwhelming amount of uncertainty, the variables of which continue to change on an almost daily basis, the destination of that journey remains the same, and that is what Palm Sunday is here to remind us of today: we are still destined for Jerusalem. I've never really paid attention to the last two verses of this story until this week. It says, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'" I want to focus my remarks around just this sentence.

Jerusalem is a city in turmoil. There are three feasts of pilgrimage in the Jewish calendar, where people come from all over to make sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem and worship there, and this one is the biggest—Passover. This is the backdrop to the Palm Sunday story. The crowds aren't really there for Jesus. Some just made the trip with him, ranging the spectrum from genuine disciples to celebrity coattail riders. One estimate says that though Jerusalem had a stable population of around 30,000 people at this time, during the Passover, Jerusalem held closer to 200,000. This creates South by Southwest levels of turmoil.

Though we have been spared the SXSW turmoils of traffic and tourists crowding our favorite restaurants, we are living in a different kind of generalized turmoil right now—almost its exact inverse actually. A turmoil of isolation and anxiety. One that isn't limited to just our city but is spread throughout the globe. One that has even the most curmudgeon-y amongst us longing for presence of flower-crown wearing, e-cigarette smoking millennials en masse.

And for Jesus, there was a particular turmoil inside the generalized turmoil of the city—he, alone in the exuberant crowds, knew what was coming. He knew suffering and death were in his future. And though none of us are granted the foreknowledge Jesus both enjoyed and was haunted by, many of us can relate to the feeling of acute distress amidst generalized turmoil in this moment. Some of us are not isolated in our homes; some of us are in the fray trying to get others out. Others of us are afraid, for ourselves, for our friends and family. This virus has had one more week to crawl ever closer into our lives.

In the midst of this turmoil, whether general or acute or both, it is natural for us to be asking questions about God. To be asking the same questions as those gathered and gathering in Jerusalem: Looking at Jesus and asking ourselves "Who is this?" I don't know where you are with this question today, whether your faith is

fierce or frail or completely forgotten, but wherever you are, my sermon amounts to this encouragement: Ask that question like never before.

I know that might feel frightening. Then again it might feel like repeating a class you're positive you've already taken. Whatever's going on in your life, whatever's going on in your head, take up this question with a renewed intensity and vigor. Who is Jesus? These are beleaguering and bizarre days. And the night looks like it will get darker yet before we emerge into the dawn. But it could simultaneously be true that the season that comes next is the season of your spiritual renewal.

For this season, however long it lasts, we cannot go to church. And that is a source of deep sadness for us. And it should be. It grieves my heart every day not to be with you. Church is the place we go to learn and re-learn the answer to precisely this question—Who is Jesus? But just because we can't go to church does not mean that we cease to be the church. And it does not mean that we cease to ask and find answers to the question “Who is Jesus?” It has only changed the mechanisms through which we entertain that question.

What I mean is this: Inside this sadness of us not being able to gather physically in the same place is an opportunity for you to rediscover your membership in the priesthood of all believers. That this season of you not being able to go to church is an opportunity for you to remember anew that you still are the church. That your household is, in some way, its own parish—whether you live in a multi-generational household of 15 or if you live alone. That space—your own home—can itself be a context for worship, prayer, study, and devotion.

I don't have anything extraordinary in mind. Maybe your family used to pray before dinner but somewhere along the way you stopped. Maybe now is a moment for you to start back up again. Maybe it has never felt comfortable to have spiritual kinds of conversations with your spouse or your children—maybe now is the time to lean towards that discomfort. Maybe you start saying Morning Prayer from the prayer book. Maybe you light a candle while you make your coffee and list before God those you know who are hurting. Maybe you take up reading your Bible everyday. Stuck in our houses, this is an opportunity for us to reengage the rhythms and habits of our households and to carve out a little more space for us to entertain the question “Who is Jesus, really?”

And you're not doing any of this alone. We're still your church family. We're still your church staff. And I'm still your parish priest. We're here to help. Every week starting today we will be preparing and sending to you a “St. Mark's At Home” packet filled with resources to help you bring worship and formation into the parish of your household. We're still making grocery runs and phone calls—so so so many phone calls. We're still in regular contact with our mission and outreach partners working on the frontlines of this crisis. We are still a church family.

Who is Jesus? The Palm Sunday story gives us as good a place as any to start asking that question again. He is a King? But he's on a donkey?! Interesting. Tell me more. He's a prophet? But from Nazareth? Huh. Tell me more. Stick with the question, through this week and beyond, even as things in our world get more difficult. Because at the end of the day, Jesus is either God or he's not. And if he's God, he remains God through whatever is coming our way. And if he's not, then I need to get a different job.

This sermon is nothing but an invitation. This is the beginning of Holy Week. You won't have the opportunity to come to church. But you will have an opportunity to walk with Jesus into Jerusalem. Turmoil may lie ahead of us. But remember Jesus has already gone ahead of you. There is no darkness to which God in Christ has not already descended ahead of us. And as we walk together into the darkness of Holy Week, into whatever darkness might lie ahead of us, the bonds between us and God may just grow stronger than they ever have before. That certainly is my prayer for us this Holy Week.

Amen.