

Holy Week: Palm Sunday – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 21:1-9: “Everything According to His Plan”
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In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God heavenly Father, we give You hearty thanks that for us poor sinners You ordained and sent Your Son as a righteous King and Savior to redeem Your people from sins, from the power of the devil, and from eternal death. And we most heartily ask You to enlighten and govern us by Your Holy Spirit that we may ever know and confess Christ to be our King and Savior and, firmly trusting in Him alone, receive eternal life through Him, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, CPH 2009, p. 605)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is written in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” / This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, “Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’” / The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who went to Jerusalem knowing that suffering, cross, and death were waiting for Him, but who went forward willingly in obedience to His Father and out of love for you, dear fellow redeemed:

If you had the ability to look into the future, and you could see that something tragic was going to happen to someone you love, you would almost certainly try to keep it from happening. This is a common theme in time travel movies. But the characters in these movies discover that even small changes in one time and place have unintended consequences and immense effects on what comes afterward. They find that when humans try to “play God,” the results are catastrophic.

Now imagine that you were part of the crowd on that Palm Sunday. Leading up to this day, everyone was talking about whether Jesus would come to Jerusalem for the Passover. You hoped to see Him. You had heard about the miracles He had done in Judea and Galilee over the past three years. You also heard how He recently raised Lazarus from the dead after he had been in

the tomb four days. "Could this be the Messiah?" you wondered. "Who else could do what He does?"

If He was the Messiah, the Chosen of God, the Son of David, who better to take the throne of Jerusalem and lead God's people Israel? Then word started to spread that Jesus was on His way. You left the city to see for yourself and followed the crowd to the Mount of Olives. You heard the singing and shouting before you saw Him, and then He came into view. There He was, your King, *"humble, and mounted on a donkey."* The future of Israel looked bright!

But let's say that in that moment of excitement and joy, God gave you a vision of the next six days. You saw the conflict and clashes that would take place between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. You saw them plotting by candlelight how they could have Jesus arrested and eliminated. You saw Judas making a deal to betray Him for thirty pieces of silver. You saw His arrest in the garden, His mistreatment and abuse from His captors, His flogging, the crown of thorns, and finally the crucifixion. You saw Him taken down from the cross after His death and placed in a tomb before a stone was rolled over the entrance.

If you saw all that in a vision on Palm Sunday, what would you do? Perhaps you would try to get the attention of Jesus' disciples to let them know what terrible things were coming. Or you might try to reach Jesus Himself to warn Him. Maybe you would try somehow to stop the enemies of Jesus from harming Him. You could get word out to the Israelites gathered in Jerusalem to stay on the lookout and not let the authorities take Jesus. Whatever you could do, whatever it took, you would keep Jesus from being arrested and killed.

This is exactly what Peter and the other disciples tried to do. Remember how Jesus predicted His suffering and death in Jerusalem and His resurrection on the third day? Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, *"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you"* (Mat. 16:22). Then on the night of Jesus' betrayal, Peter declared, *"If I must die with you, I will not deny you"* (Mar. 14:31), and all the other disciples said the same. When a band of soldiers later met Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Him, Peter drew his sword and got ready to fight to the death (Joh. 18:10).

But Jesus put a stop to all these attempts. He did not need someone to fight for Him. He was not looking for anyone to stop Him from doing what He came to do. The account of Christ's passion recorded in the four Gospels does not read like a tragedy, as though Jesus got caught up in something that He didn't see coming. He was no unfortunate fly getting stuck in a big spider web. Everything He did had purpose.

Look at today's reading. As He made His way to Jerusalem, He gave two of His disciples specific instructions about a donkey and a colt in a nearby village. He told them where to find them and what to say if someone questioned them as they led the animals away. Everything happened just like He said, and it fulfilled a prophecy recorded by the prophet Zechariah more than 500 years earlier (Zec. 9:9).

We find these references throughout the Gospels, that Jesus did what He did *"that the Scripture might be fulfilled."* Bible scholars point to hundreds of prophecies like this. The life of Jesus does not just occasionally connect to what the Old Testament says. His life perfectly matches all the

prophecies of the coming Messiah. Jesus Himself called attention to this. He said, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”* (Mat. 5:17). And again, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me”* (Joh. 5:39).

Jesus had a plan. Everything was laid out for Him by the Father. It was no miscalculation that led Jesus to Jerusalem. It was no mistake that He was handed over to the Jews and then to the Roman officials. No one made Him go to the cross. Some time before this, Jesus said, *“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father”* (Joh. 10:18). He perfectly did what His Father sent Him to do as today’s Epistle lesson says, *“he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”* (Phi. 2:8).

But what was the point of it all? Why go through that torment and agony? Why go to Jerusalem in order to get arrested and crucified? The answer is that it was for you. Do you find that hard to believe? Do you find it hard to believe that you would be part of God’s plan that led Jesus to the cross? You might feel like you are not important enough for that. You might think that God has bigger things to think about than you. He disagrees.

God the Father had you in mind when He promised to send a Savior. He had you in mind when He sent the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary to announce that she would bear the Christ-Child. Jesus had you in mind when He perfectly kept the Law of God in your place, when He made His way to Jerusalem to suffer, and when He endured the wrath of God on the cross. What makes me so sure that it was all for you? Because He says so, John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

You are part of the world. That means God loves you. That means He sent His Son to live for you, die for you, and rise again for you. He has shown that love for you in your lifetime by bringing you to the cleansing waters of Baptism and calling you by the Gospel to be His own. He speaks His gracious Word of absolution from my sinful mouth into your sinful ears. He gives the holy body and blood of Jesus for you to eat and drink. There is no doubt about it, what God sent His Son to do in Jerusalem was for you, for your salvation and mine.

That has a profound effect on how we think about our life. If you were part of God’s plan that sent His perfect Son to suffer and die, then He must have a plan for you today. You must not be an afterthought to Him. You must not have to make your own way in this world. He must have many blessings in store for you until He finally brings you into His kingdom.

This is a comforting thought and very liberating. If God has the plan for me, then I don’t have to try to control everything. If He has the plan for me, then I can accept hardships and health challenges and heartaches as trials that He will use to strengthen my faith in Him.

On our own, we might have an idea about how we want our life to go, but the path forward is unclear. We look back at some of the choices we made, thinking we had a good plan, and we see how far off we were. We didn’t have the faithfulness and the focus that we should have had, and it caused troubles that affect us still today. We learned the hard way that our heart is not a

trustworthy compass. We can't trust our own sense of direction to lead us into the future because our sense is misguided by sin.

The author of Hebrews tells us how to stay on course: *"let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (12:1-2). At the right hand of the throne of God, Jesus dispenses His gifts of grace through the holy means He has given to His Church.

He does not leave you to fend for yourself in this life, to stumble blindly through the clouds and darkness, to search for answers or meaning that never appear. *"Behold, your King is coming to you."* He comes through the preaching of His Word. He comes through the cleansing waters of Baptism. He comes in His Holy Supper, which is why we sing that Palm Sunday song in our Communion liturgy: *"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."* He comes to bring you His forgiveness, His holiness, His strength for your daily struggles and needs.

We keep our eyes on Him, following Him through His triumphal entry at Jerusalem, the institution of His Holy Supper on Maundy Thursday, His suffering and death on Good Friday, His glorious resurrection on the third day, and His victorious ascension into heaven. Everything He accomplished is for you. Everything happened according to God's will for your salvation, your life, your future – **Everything According to His Plan.**

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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