

“Faith”

Acts 3:12-26; John 12:12–19 (NRSV)

**God calls us to put our faith in Christ.
It is that simple.**



One of the Scripture passages for today takes us from Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter to Pentecost and the faith of the first Christians. Peter’s sermon is a call to faith, a call to rely upon Jesus in death and in life. For, yes, Palm Sunday was right on the mark. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem wrapped in all the symbols of Messiah, he was being utterly truthful. Yes, he was and is Messiah, the anointed one of God, come to usher in the kingdom of God.

Who is Jesus?

This is the Palm Sunday question. It is the central question of the New Testament. It was the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. But it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The Palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God’s Messiah, his anointed one. The crowds shout “Hosanna,” which means “save us” in Hebrew. They sing out “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel.” This is from Psalm 118, a song of God’s victory, the day when God has finally acted. The crowds expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King and that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has finally come to a head.

But John helps us to grasp that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John’s quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God’s people – very messianic in other words. But there is much more at work here than even the arrival of God’s Messiah.

John changes the opening words of the Zechariah quotation from “*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*” to “*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*” Here, John evokes Zephaniah 3: “The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more . . . Do not fear, O Zion . . .”

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. God had once been their king and now God would be their king again: God incarnate in Jesus.

Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God’s departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn’t really any sign that God had returned.¹ The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God’s promise: “See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1).

¹ I do not have the space to develop this, but here is the general idea. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land, they were certainly still in jail—with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven. The coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God’s Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel . . . That’s a lot packed into a few sentences, but this *is* a footnote after all!

WHY “GOOD” FRIDAY?

I get this question often. It is certainly understandable.

The etymology of the “Good” here is not clear. Some think it comes from “God’s Friday.” Other scholars believe it simply derives from the German, *Gute Freitag*. But regardless of where the English term came from, the theology of “Good Friday” can be embraced by all Christians.

Calling it “Good Friday” acknowledges that out of the tragedy of Jesus’ crucifixion came the greatest possible good – God’s victory over sin and death.

Standing at the foot of Jesus’ cross on Friday, it would have been impossible to see any good in it at all. Without Easter, Jesus’ story would have been a tragedy. The memory of his actions and teachings might have been cherished by his immediate followers, but he would have gone down in history as one of several well-meaning but failed messiahs in the first century.

But Jesus’ resurrection meant that he had triumphed over death and, because death was the consequence of sin, he had triumphed over sin as well. Jesus’ resurrection meant that God had acted in the present world to restore humanity and all of creation to a right relationship with himself. What could be a greater “good” than that?

What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on the next day, Jesus didn’t head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple.

The image of Jesus riding into the city is one that stirs our hearts, but let’s look ahead a few days to the evening when Jesus shares his last supper with his disciples.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life”

After much trouble and tumult in the days after Palm Sunday, Jesus has finally come to the end of his long journey into the mouth of the beast. He has gathered his disciples together for one last meal together. He has washed their feet, sharing one last demonstration of the nature of God. And now, only hours away from arrest and crucifixion, Jesus seeks to reassure his disciples. He must go. And they cannot, they will not, follow.

Nonetheless, Jesus tells them to rest their troubled hearts. They can trust him just as they trust God. There are many rooms where Jesus is going and he will prepare a place for each of them. They may not realize it, as Thomas doesn’t, but they already know the way to the place where Jesus is going . . . to heaven, the place where Jesus will be reunited with them as they await the great resurrection.

Jesus is the way to this place, this paradise: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” There is no other way, no other path, only Jesus: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is now unambiguously clear about his identity with

Messiahs and Kings

There are certain keys to understanding the Gospels. One of these is the relationship between our understandings of messiah, king, and God.

To a first-century Jew, Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah was to say that he was God’s King, the one who would inaugurate the coming of God’s kingdom. Therefore, Matthew takes pains in the first chapter of his gospel to show that Jesus could lay claim to the house of David, for God’s king was to come from David’s line.

To a first-century Jew, claiming to be the Messiah was not a claim to be God. There was no sense of divinity in the Jewish understanding of the Messiah.

the Father: “If really you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” In other words, when the disciples have seen Jesus, they have seen God!

There’s something very important to notice about exactly what Jesus says. It is not his way that he is talking about – he *is* the way. He isn’t speaking here of living as he lived or loving as he loved – Jesus *is* the way. Just as Jesus is the gateway for the sheep (John 10), he is the path to this place we call heaven.² Jesus is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God.

For the last couple of centuries, Jesus’ simple and profound statement, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” has been endlessly controversial. How arrogant! How exclusive! How divisive! Yet, Jesus’ claim and the early Christians’ claims about him are made abundantly clear in John’s Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” If this is truly the truth, if it is “true truth,” how could one claim to know God and yet disown Jesus?

When we begin to talk about the Christian truth claims in comparison to other religions and belief systems, the questions always boil down to this: Who is Jesus? As we continue on our journey with God, we reflect and pray upon the salvation that is Good Friday and the proof that is Easter Sunday. Therein lies the truth about Jesus.

² Jesus will call this place “paradise” when he speaks the next afternoon to a brigand on the cross next to his own (Luke 23:43).