

# Sermon Text for March 28, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 11:1-10*

*“Palm and the Pandemic”*

I am really looking forward to this week. We are going to see a little bit of normalcy and be involved in services and events that we had to categorically cancel last year. Holy Week 2021 is going to be different from 2020, we will not be staying home, but it will also be different from 2019, where we will be cautious and careful. I am grateful for a bit of normalcy. We will have our Maundy Thursday services in person, but different. We won't gather around the table for communion or wash feet like we are used to. We will gather for Good Friday services but it won't be community wide, just us. We will gather for an egg hunt but the numbers will be limited and all the protocols will be in place. We will be together in person for Easter, finally, but we will have three services to make sure that we are able to keep spread out and safe.

It has been exciting to see preschool continue to meet from beginning to end each child with their mask on and no tantrums, for at least the children, the parents, well... Sometimes kids know better than we do what is best and how things just are. But this has lasted a long time, a long long time and way more than any of us wanted. None of us want church this way, but this is the season that the Lord calls us to be His family in this way, just for now.

Some of you may be thinking, are you going to talk about this every week? I would answer is there anything that more directly impacts you every single day and challenges you every single than this pandemic that we are facing. The anxieties, the fractures, the emotions, the change of plans, the challenges that we are experiencing are palpable and directly related to the pandemic.

So how did Jesus and his disciples, how did Isaiah deal with life in the midst of a crisis when it felt like everyone was against them, that the world had turned upside down? Who could they rely on even as they were confused, unsure of the next steps. Isaiah states clearly two times in the Scripture that we just read: The Lord God helps me. Can we say that together as a church this Sunday in the midst of palms and the pandemic, can we say The Lord God helps me and believe it? If you are watching and want to chat, write in: The Lord God helps me. Let's say it together in this room and at home and let's believe it: The Lord God helps me.

**READ**

We have seen Isaiah quite a few times together. You have heard quite a few times about the suffering servant, we looked at them in Bible Study, we looked at them during Advent, and now this Sunday as we take a break from our time in Philippians where we are constantly surprised by joy, we look at it in Lent. Throughout Scripture we find this phrase “how long” repeated by some of the authors of the Old Testament. This question of “how long” has been repeated throughout this pandemic in a variety of different formats and it is a question we all want answered. Let’s look at some of the Scriptures where we see that question asked and take comfort that as we ask it, we are in good company: Psalm 13: How long Lord? Will you forget me forever? Psalm 6: My soul is in deep anguish. How long Lord, how long? Psalm 35: How long Lord will you just look on? Psalm 89: How long Lord, will you hide yourself forever? Psalm 79: How long Lord? Will you be angry forever? Psalm 94: How long Lord will the wicked how long will the wicked be jubilant? Habakkuk 1: How long Lord must I call for help but you do not listen?

There are more, this is just a taste, so that you can get a sense of what these Scriptures say and what they mean and how the author is feeling. You understand that feeling well during this time. Now the approach to suffering by the servant in Isaiah 50 is very different from those Scriptures which we just read. We see the servant being subjected to vs.6 his back being beaten, his head pulled, his face being spat upon and insults rained upon them. In the face of all of this being imposed upon him Isaiah is able to state, look at vs. 7: The Lord God helps me. Look at vs.9: It is the Lord who helps me. He lists a litany of support where he states: Who is going to stand against us? Let us stand up together. Who is against us? Let them come against us. The Lord God helps me. We said that earlier, do you remember? Do we mean it at all times?

We should, we have precedent for it. Look at Romans 8:31, boy do I hope these verses sound familiar: What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, nor pandemic, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Palms and the Pandemic. Mark is different in his account of Palm Sunday. Every single Gospel speaks of Palm Sunday, but Mark is different. It is much more subdued. God year to read Mark. It is basically just Jesus and his disciples going into Jerusalem. No great crowds, the

world doesn't go after him like in the other Gospels. But before he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey there was some work to do, and that is where we pick up in chapter 11. Jesus sends off his disciples in vs.4 to untie a donkey that they will find as they enter the city. He prepares them with a script to read from if someone asks them what they are doing.

None of it makes sense, because how in the world can Jesus know what is going to happen. But he prepares them and says, don't worry about that, if you run into this situation, this is what you should do and everything will work out. It reminds me of Jesus with Peter in Luke 5:1-4. If you have your Bibles look at that story. Peter and his disciples have been fishing all day, Jesus is speaking to the crowds on the shoreline because there were so many of them. When he is done he says to Peter, alright, let's go fishing. Throw your net over there. So Jesus, a carpenter, is telling Peter, a professional fisherman, what to do in regard to fishing.

It would be like one of our accountants telling a farmer how to plant his fields, or one of our teachers telling our medical workers how to treat a patient. Peter doesn't really object, just makes it clear that they do know what they are doing: We've been fishing all day Jesus, not a bite, today isn't a good day, it is too sunny, the waves are too high. But, because you say so, I will do it. The disciples as they go into the city to get the colt are through their actions saying: Because Jesus said so, we will do it. We are confused, we don't know why we are to do this, but Jesus told us to do it, that is good enough.

They went and they found it exactly as Jesus had said it would be. It was as if Jesus had planned it all along and in the midst of their confusion there was no way that they could have known that. Even as we struggle to see a reason and a purpose, if we follow Jesus' plan then we will see our work and the work of God come to fruition. When we try to work outside of that plan then we miss what God is doing.

On Palm Sunday the disciples plan was one that was very different from that of Jesus. They were ushering in the victorious and conquering king. Jesus' plan was an entry into his suffering and his death. Even today we cry Hosanna in the midst of a storm that surrounds us. We don't do well with humility, with putting others first, with ensuring the most vulnerable are considered first before our needs and our desires are met. The palms are a sign of victory, but also a sign of our shame our me first mentality.

On Thursday Waterstreet held a program called Compelled by Love and it really was a great event. People much smarter than I am called this current pandemic: "We need to treat COVID-19 as an economic and cultural blizzard, winter, and beginning of a 'little ice age' —a

once-in-a-lifetime change that is likely to affect our lives and organizations (I would add churches) for years.”

But we also heard that crises present opportunities. We seized those opportunities at the very beginning, do you remember? Our nimble food bank transitioned to drive up and over 50 volunteers were involved in shopping and manning the food bank and doing administration and donating. We created CAC and gave our over \$17,000 to those within this community who had lost jobs. We reached out to all of you through phone calls, letters. It created an opportunity to meet the needs that were so evident and so present right in front of us. It seemed like the Lord had prepared us for exactly this kind of situation. We could say with conviction that The Lord God helped me.

But part of the definition of a crisis is that it isn't supposed to last very long. You deal with the crisis and then you go on with your life in a normal way. Yeah, not so much. This crisis is ongoing now over a year, and well, we got tired. We put a timeframe on how long the crisis was allowed to last. We told the Lord, okay, we're out of ideas now so you can bring this to an end. But the crisis continued. While at the beginning we were able to move forward like the disciples on Palm Sunday with a plan without knowing all the answers, just knowing that this was the direction and that they were prepared with something.

But over time this really powerful element of allowing ourselves to give up control of what is happening and discerning the will of God over time fades. You know, there is actually someone behind the scenes in this church who is trying to control it. When we are unsure our default is to go to what we know is the normal. But in a crisis the normal won't do. Jesus wants to control the church, there I said it, Jesus is working behind the scenes to wrest control of this church away from us, because we are clinging too tightly. Jesus wants every decision we make be made for the sake of a loving God and loving our neighbors. And when we want the normal to the point where it jeopardizes our neighbor then we are not allowing Jesus to control this church.

At our Congregational Impact Committee meeting on Thursday evening I kept repeating to the group that what we are not trying to do is create something that will just benefit us, the members, those who attend, those who stream. But the community as a whole. What we do with our properties may impact people who never step in these doors, they may never put a penny in the offering plate, but our call is to love God and our neighbor even to the point where we are willing to gear our ministries in a way that does not prioritize our own gain. Are we willing to

do something that might benefit the community as whole but on face value have zero or even negative impact on us as an individual church?

Loving our neighbor is a collective pursuit. Over history plagues and famines have been the time when the church has done its best and most significant work. As we enter Holy Week on Palm Sunday we know what happens with the disciples. Over time the excitement faded, the Lord had prepared them for it, but they got tired of it. Let's learn our lesson and remember, always remember, that the Lord God helps me. Amen.