

Sermon Text for March 24, 2024

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Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 21:1-11

“The highs and lows of being a follower.”

Welcome to Palm Sunday! It is traditionally a service of celebration with Jesus riding into Jerusalem triumphantly, the children waving palm branches, the songs uplifting and bringing us to a place of thanksgiving for the Savior who has claimed us. But it is also a Sunday where there is a clear transition in the service from the beginning where you celebrate, to just about now, where you recognize that something serious and not so celebratory is going to happen in just a few days. Jesus is going to be betrayed, we know the story, the voices crying Hosanna will be transformed into voices crying Crucify Him!

This rhythm which is reflected in our service follows the highs and the lows of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We are not immune to the highs and lows of life, we are not immune to just about anything that any human experiences in life simply because we are followers of Jesus. I have noticed in my ministry an uptick in followers of Jesus who are experiencing not just the highs and lows but also once arriving in the lows having a more difficult time than what I have seen in getting out of those lows.

I know that I have shared with you that in my own family we have faced mental health head on with a family member who is schizophrenic. Growing up as a teenager and a young adult and maneuvering that was not easy, and walking alongside a person whom you love and who also loves Jesus more than you do at the time, was challenging to say the least. And it was a journey of mostly lows and the lows lasted for over a decade until finally some sort of balance was able to be struck.

You know that there is a certain stigma in society related to mental health. But what cannot be accepted is the stigma that exists within the church in relationship to struggles with mental health and the clear lack of resources to be able to provide people within the church who at times find themselves in the lows to say the least, fighting demons might be more accurate, in their own lives. Within the church it can be seen as a barometer for your faith and those who fight this reality often consider themselves as people with less faith or little faith compared to maybe those who don't fight these demons of mental health. When I say it out loud we know it doesn't make sense, but that tends to be the reality in which we find ourselves.

Why talk about this today? The highs and lows of being a follower and especially how do we address in a healthy way the lows that don't seem to go away? Well, this is for the

disciples of Jesus probably the highest of the high in their ministry with Jesus. This is the closest that Jesus comes to being crowned King. He even goes into the temple after this and clears it out. Things are going well. Since it is March Madness, we are up 20 at halftime, what can go wrong? We know that today on Palm Sunday we also have in our sights the lowest of the low, Good Friday and this transition that takes place with the crowd reminds us of that today as well.

The church doesn't do mental health well. We often refer people to professionals with no connection to the church at all. Within the field of psychology and psychiatry while the general population about 90% of people believe in God, about 40% in that field do. We need more good Christian psychologists and psychiatrists, as a parent and as a youth consider that as field. Julia Wilson is currently on track to be a voice, a Christian voice in that field so we praise God for that.

We serve a Savior, we love a Jesus who is described as meek and gentle and humble, as someone who in today's society might be classified as weak and not strong enough. Phrases and words that those who struggle with mental health have faced all of their life. Today, I hope, as we track the highs and the lows of the followers of Jesus that we will experience a hope and a glimmer of recognition that the church, this church, not only cares but wants to walk alongside and understand. Let's read.

READ

So what happened on Palm Sunday? We have taken a step back in our timeline. We are no longer in Matthew 26, we are a few days before all the events that we followed throughout Lent. We often identify the passion as the arrest and the beating and the torture and the crucifixion of Jesus, but really the passion begins today. Today begins what we call Holy Week which is really the passion of Jesus. We read that Jesus gives a directive to his disciples to go into the nearest city and the first donkey that you see grab it and bring it to me. Okay. No hesitation, no sense of this might not be the best idea. No questioning or talking back. They went and did what Jesus asked them to do.

That should be the theme of our life. We went and did what Jesus asked us to do. Oh how things would be different for all of us if we just went and did what Jesus asked us to do and didn't ask questions, or question why or for what purpose. Sometimes the ups and downs of a modern disciple is reflected in the ups and downs of our obedience to Christ. Here we see no questioning, just obedience, how refreshing. Just like what we see in the Garden of Gethsemane, this story is all about Jesus who is able to control the individual events that take place so that

Scripture can be fulfilled. Jesus ensures that God's will is done, even if the disciples don't know what is happening or what it will lead to.

They ride into Jerusalem and it feels like something unique and different is happening. Now, you need to know that all of Jerusalem would have been welcoming pilgrims into the city this whole time. Family members would be lining the streets to see if they could identify their own family who might be coming from another town and so everyone is greeted the Hosanna, welcome you who come in the name of the Lord.

The times that I have gone to Israel we have had to wait in line in order to get into the temple mount. When you are waiting in line you are right next to a large Jerusalem gate which is the favorite for people who are celebrating the bar mitzvahs of their sons. So this whole time that you are waiting in line you will see a crowd of people who are hoisting up in the air this 13 year old kid and they are celebrating, I mean absolutely carrying on with trumpets, and tambourines, and singing and shouting and yelling. And as they pass by it feels like the entire city is celebrating because those waiting in line start clapping their hands to celebrate this kid and until they move past you then it dies down and you are in quiet again waiting to get into this place. But then another group comes and the whole city celebrates.

For that young man it feels like all of Jerusalem is celebrating his special day. For his family it feels like this is the most exciting thing they have ever experienced. And then then next day the 13 year old talks back to his parents or has a bad day or whatever, but at least for that moment, it just might be the highest of the highs. That's what it was like for the disciples of Jesus. Things can't get any better than this. And then they go into the temple and turn over tables and clear it out. Wow, this is awesome!

But if you are one of the people lining the street, you're just trying to identify your family members who haven't arrived yet and that one person who entered is going to be followed by other people. So while today in the Christian church we celebrate this as a big event, it was probably limited to a few minutes of chaos and then quickly dissipated. To the disciples this is going to change the world. To those in Jerusalem, who was that, oh Jesus, they call him the prophet, just another day leading into Passover. Our Christian imagination takes this moment probably further than it ought.

But the disciples would have taken this as potentially the highest of their experience with Jesus. Now all of Jerusalem will crown him as king, I mean after all the entire city of Jerusalem is shaking according to vs.10 because of Jesus. Our own journeys of following Jesus are filled with these highs and lows. We have all had mountaintop experiences that have been difficult to

explain to others but so real and so life changing to us. How come no one else understands or feels the way that I do? But similarly with the lows, how come no one else understands how I feel, am I the only one who feels this way?

Jesus was not immune to the highs and the lows of the lives that we live. He understood what it meant to be labeled as someone whose highs and lows needed to be corrected and probably reflected something more than just the normal course of life. We read in Mark 3:21 that his family comes out to gather him up, they planned and were carrying out an intervention because they had heard and believed that Jesus had lost his mind. Folks, this is the Savior that we worship. This same person who is meek and humble as if someone who is meek and humble could in any way save the world today.

We know that he often went away to pray by himself, and maybe this meant that he times when he simply needed a physical and emotional and mental break from all the clamor and the chaos and the confusion that was constantly a part of his life. He needed to recover from the life that he was living. Jesus experienced the highs and lows of life so why in the world would we ever think that we or any other follower of Jesus would be immune. That is simply not realistic nor healthy, nor productive. We are followers who experience the highs and lows of life and sometimes those lows are really difficult and last a really long time.

But there is a difference in our journey from the journey of non-believers. Let's be clear what we are saying today. As a disciple we are not protected from depression and crippling anxiety or schizophrenia or any other diagnosed mental health struggle. We do not have less faith or somehow become less of a disciple when we struggle. We experience the highs and the lows of being a follower but what makes it different for us is that even in the midst of our despair there is hope. We may not feel it at the time, but it is a truth that we cannot change based upon how we feel. It is a promise of Jesus that nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing. The Jesus we serve was described as weak and didn't defend himself and yet the glory that came as a result of that is shared by all of us in our salvation.

In his times of doubt and suffering and in his lowest of his lows he never doubted his identity. In the highs and the lows of discipleship we might slip into losing our identity, our primary identity which is not associated with how we feel, or how sick or how healthy we are, or how things are going in life, but it is based upon the fact that we are made in God's image. God made us individually and uniquely and loves us all regardless of our current state of affairs.

I should probably get out now, but we have to talk about the current role of the church as we are people who experience clear highs and lows and whose lows are sometimes completely

debilitating to the point where we may wonder will we ever get better? Today as Palm Sunday the church tends to do this pretty well. It is the high. But Good Friday, well, we don't always know what to do and so we stay with the celebration unaware that what happens on Good Friday is that the disciples desert Jesus and so in our own way we may, without knowing it, be deserting those who aren't able to make it out of Good Friday alone.

While there is no getting around the highs and lows of discipleship, we do have a template before us in Jesus whom we know accompanies us along the way at all times. Isaiah tells us that we have one who has promised to "take us by the hand and keep us, to be a light and to open the eyes of those who are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the pit, bring us out from the pit when are sitting in darkness." That is the God that we serve. Amen.