

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon: Walking Through Holy Week Dr. Scott Dudley

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So, Lord, we do thank you and, God, ask that as we turn to your word, you help us learn from it and be more like you. Lord, we remember that you are good and that your goodness is pursuing us. God, help us to keep being reminded of that in the middle of whatever we are facing, Lord. You are good and when we praise you, we are put in a better place, Lord, we become more like you. So we give you our thanks, we give you our praise and help us learn from your word in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, hello. Thank you for joining us at our new service time. We've separated them a little bit, the services, in order to have as few people as possible in the building. So thank you for joining us at our new time, wherever you are, in your kitchen, your living room, wherever you are.

One Sunday morning, I remember after I got done preaching, I was hanging out afterwards and a little girl about five years old motioned that she wanted to talk to me. Sometimes kids like to talk to me because they see me up front or they see me at home on the TV screen or computer screen and they think I'm some kind of famous celebrity, which makes me feel like a rock star, which is kind of awesome. So I leaned down and I said, "Sure. What do you want to say?" She looked at me and said, "Your jokes aren't very funny." Okay, okay. Not what I expected to hear, but good feedback, good feedback. Good to get that.

It's also what I want to talk about. That was not what I expected to hear from her. That's what I want to talk about, is expectations, today. Not funny jokes, but expectations. Because today is the start of Holy Week and there's a lot of expectations around Holy Week, particularly that first Holy Week. Holy Week is where we remember the last week of Jesus' life leading up to his death and his resurrection.

In the Protestant tradition, there are four days in Holy Week that we celebrate, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, which we'll celebrate later this week and please join us on the live stream for that, and then Palm Sunday is today, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and then next week, Easter Sunday, four days that we celebrate.

The accounts of those four days in the Bible shows that in each one of them, Jesus does not do what we expect him to do. He does not meet our expectations. But in the middle of not meeting our expectations, that's actually helpful for us because the ways he defies our expectations helps us grow and become people of courage and hope and faith that we can make it through this pandemic and all the other stuff we got going in our lives.

But especially as we're in the middle of this epidemic that's affecting all of us, how does Holy Week and what happens in those days, how does it help us in the middle of what we are in right now? For students who are trying to figure out how to do school online or maybe tired of being at home with your family, it's a little too much family time and want to be able to see your friends? Or for seniors in high school right now, oh, my goodness, right? You realize that you may not have a graduation ceremony or can't play the last quarter of your sport or sing in the last school conference? For others who fear for their health or for their finances, as well as all the other things we face in life that are not COVID-related, just the regular stuff of life?

Jesus does not meet our expectations and that's good news because our desires are far too small and he gives us so much more than what we want for ourselves. He makes us people of courage and hope and indestructible joy. He makes people new so that they can participate with him in renewing the world.

We see a lot of different ways in the four days of Holy Week that Jesus does not meet our expectations. It starts on Palm Sunday, which we're celebrating today when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and the text says that the crowds took palm branches and went to him shouting, "Hosanna, blessed is the King of Israel." The keyword there is king. They're expecting Jesus to be a conquering king who's going to drive out the occupying Roman army and they're super excited about that. Because for 500 years, they have been conquered by various countries, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans. They been conquered by all of them. They are 0 in 5 and their season is not improving at all, right? If they were a basketball team, they wouldn't even be in the B leagues. They'd be in someone's driveway playing horse and they wouldn't even have an H. They've just been rolled over for 500 years, so they're hoping that Jesus is going to launch a revolution that will kick out the Romans.

But he doesn't do that. Instead, he died to pay the price for our sins and ushered in what he called the kingdom of God, which is different than the earthly kingdom those people were hoping for that first Palm Sunday. Jesus' kingdom is about changing men and women from the inside out to be more like him. Then they changed the world, not by conquering the world but through through courage and love and being servant-leaders.

In the first Palm Sunday, Jesus is deliberately satirizing a typical Roman parade. Because back then when a general conquered a city, the general would ride in at the head of this huge parade with all of his

troops and all of his captives right at the head of this parade on a huge horse, right, to kind of show how powerful he was.

But the text says that Jesus rides into the city on a donkey and not even just a donkey, a baby donkey. Like, who does that, right? If this were a movie, it would be a comic scene, right, because it's such a satire of a typical parade. It'd be as if one of our presidential candidates or senate candidates rode into one of her rallies on a unicycle wearing leotards, which I suppose could happen these days. Anything's possible. But for the people there, this is just not what they expected, not the conquering king they expected.

Jesus does this to show that he's a very different kind of king who conquers through love and leads by serving. The thing is, it's the most revolutionary revolution ever. Because, see, every other revolution, it just changes who's on the top and who's on the bottom, but there's still a top and there's still a bottom.

But Jesus says, "I don't want to just put a new set of people in power. I want a new kind of power in power. I want a new kind of power in power that transforms us from the inside out." Jesus says, "I want so much more for you than you want for yourself. I have come to liberate you from something far more oppressive than the Romans. I've come to set you free from your shame and your guilt and the things that you feel bad over because of what you've done or what you haven't done. I have come to give you hope and courage and make you people of peace and indestructible joy and make people new so that they can work with me to renew the world. I want so much more for you than you want for yourself."

See, eventually Jesus really did conquer the Roman empire, but not through the use of the sword. It came a different way. As more and more of his followers started following him and doing what he says to do and caring for the sick and helping the poor and empowering women and started hospitals and started orphanages, pretty soon there was more justice for the poor and there was more justice for women and people stopped going to gladiator games because violence wasn't glamorized anymore. Jesus and his followers completely transformed the Roman empire, but not through the use of the sword, but through changing people's hearts one at a time.

The problem is that is not what those people on that first Palm Sunday wanted. They wanted a conquering king. Palm Sunday represents all the times we get excited about Jesus for what he can do for us, what we think he can do for us. "Jesus give me the college I want, the friends I want, the jobs I want, the immediate end to this pandemic that everybody wants." It's when we get excited about what we think he can do for us, rather than the bigger and better kingdom that he actually ushers in to our lives and to the world.

Back when I was teaching, I had a student who applied for a Rhode Scholarship and he tried to make a deal with God about it. He said, "God, if you give me the Rhode scholarship, I will tell everyone that I

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got it because of you." I remember saying to him, "I don't think it works that way." He said, "Well, why not? What better way to make God look good than to make me a Rhode scholar?" I thought I can think of lots of other ways to make God look good, rather than that.

We all do that some version of that or not. "Jesus, here's my plans, here's my agenda, here's what I want. Jesus, bless it. Please make it happen. Jesus, make my dreams come true. All I need for Christmas is you, Jesus, to do what I want you to do." But Jesus didn't come to make us happy. He came to make us holy and whole and brave and new, which is better, but it's not what we expect.

Which leads us to the second day of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday where Jesus, the night before he is crucified, has one last supper with his disciples. It's also the night when one of his disciples named Judas betrays him and leads the religious leaders who wanted to kill Jesus straight to them.

We don't really know why Judas did that. We don't really know why Judas betrayed Jesus. Maybe it was because the revolution wasn't happening and he was upset about that. Or maybe because he knew that the religious authorities were kind of trying to kill Jesus and he didn't want to be associated with him because he might get in trouble, too, so he switched sides.

Whatever his motives, it is clear that Judas is disillusioned with Jesus. See, Judas was willing to follow Jesus when it was going to profit him, but once it started to cost him something, he was out. Judas was not an all-in follower of Jesus. He wanted the blessing, but he didn't want the blesser.

And he wasn't alone. All the disciples were that way. They all abandoned him. Jesus asked his disciples to pray with him that night and none of them did. They all ended up falling asleep instead. Then later that night after Jesus is arrested, Peter, one of his disciples, denies even knowing Jesus.

Maundy Thursday is about all the ways that we distance ourselves from Jesus when we don't get what we expect or what we want or when we're disillusioned. All the ways we kind of back away from him when he doesn't meet our expectations and give us what we want. Maybe we just start to ignore him a little bit. Or maybe we keep going to church, we're going through the motions, but we're not all in.

As we go through this COVID-19 crisis, things aren't going the way any of us want or the way any of us expected. There's real fear for our health and our jobs and our family and the economy. Those are big things and they're really important. Then there's all just the hassle of it, the daily frustrations of it, right?

I saw a post this week about the frustrations of trying to work at home and homeschool and have kids at home at the same time, trying to juggle all that. It said, "Are you feeling guilty about your kids watching too much TV? Just mute it and turn on the captions. Boom. Now they're reading." I thought that was kind

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of funny and the two people here didn't laugh. But you're laughing super hard at home. Okay, I think Sergio just laughed. Okay. Oh, Evan. No, Jay clapped. Thank you. Thank you. Tough crowd tonight.

This is hard. This is hard stuff. The question is, are we going to drift away from the blesser when we don't get the blessing we want, when we want it, how we want it? Or are we going to stick with him and trust that in all things he works for good?

See here again, Jesus does not meet our expectations because as much as we might run away from him, he never gives up on us. In fact, do you know who was seated at the seat of honor at the last supper? Judas. Judas. When Jesus says to his disciples, one of you will betray me, they ask, "Who is it?" The text says, "Jesus answered, 'It's the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' Then dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas."

In that culture, the first person to get the bread was the guest of honor. Judas was seated in the place of honor at the last supper, even though Jesus knew he was going to betray him. In fact, later that night when Judas led the soldiers to arrest Jesus, Jesus says this to him, "Friend, do what you're going to do." Friend. Even in the middle of Judas betraying Jesus, Jesus still calls him friend.

See, Maundy Thursday is about how Jesus loves us in spite of all our dirt and our failures and our sins and our weaknesses. How, when we run away from him, he pursues us with his goodness. About how, when we stopped believing in Jesus, he never stops believing in us. Not what we expect. That's not what we expect. It's so different and it's so better. Unconditional love, instead of the O-2 conditional love we all experience all of our lives.

Which brings us to Good Friday, the day that Jesus was crucified. Here again, Jesus does not meet our expectations, as the name suggests, because he uses that horrible event for good because God used it to pay the price for our sins that, deep down, we all know needs to be paid. It's the best, worst thing that ever happened.

Good Friday offers us real hope because it doesn't pretend that hard things don't happen. It doesn't pretend that there's not difficult things that we have to go through in life. It doesn't give us some false kind of pious hope. It takes account of the fact that there are real difficult and hard things that we go through in life, but it also shows that God can bring good even out of the worst of things.

Which leads us to the last day of Holy Week and that is Easter Sunday, which we'll celebrate next week, showing that, with God, there is no such thing as a dead end. God can conquer even death and take the worst defeat and turn it into a victory.

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There's a story, some of you may know this story, about a painting called Checkmate that depicts the king in checkmate. Well, as the story goes, one day a master chess player was looking at that painting and studying it and finally said, "The painting is wrong. The king is not in checkmate. The king has one more move." That's Easter. No matter what we face, the king always has one more move, and it's not what we expect, right? You would expect that Jesus' death would have meant the end of his movement. That's what you would expect. But Easter shows that God always has one more move, even in the worst of times.

It's what's so profound about the cross, and only Christianity is the only religion that has a crucified God. It says it is in God's nature. It is God's DNA. It's just what God does is to take bad things and pull good things out of them. He can't help himself. It's just what he does. He brings good out of bad. COVID-19 has not checkmated our God. Our king still has one more move. If you're all here right now, y'all be jumping up and down. You'd be shouting "Hallelujah" and "Amen" and... No, you wouldn't. Y'all be going, hmm. Pastor Alexis would be shouting hallelujah, you guys would be going, "Hmm. But it's good news."

Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, four ways Jesus defies our expectations by pursuing an agenda that is not ours to make us holy and whole and brave, by loving us at our worst when we have run away from him and walked away from him, by using our sin that crucified him to pay the price for our sins and save us, and by turning a dead end into a new beginning. Four days.

Then there's a day, one more day, that we do not celebrate in Holy Week in the Protestant tradition and I've always wondered why. Because in some ways, I think this one day that we don't celebrate is maybe, in some ways, the most important day of all Holy Week, Saturday, the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Do you ever wonder what the disciples were doing on Saturday? Having seen Jesus killed the day before in one of the most painful deaths that's ever been made up, right? They were cowering and hiding, fearful for their lives, fearful the authorities were going to find them and they were going to be next.

But they also had this promise, which must have seem ludicrous at the time that Jesus would rise from the dead because he said he was going to. What do you think the disciples were doing on Saturday between the tragedy and the triumph, the peril and the promise?

Here's the thing, BelPres. Most of life is Saturday. Most of our life is Saturday. It's after the painful breakup of a significant relationship, but before God heals the grief. It's after you lose your job, but before God leads you to a new opportunity. It's being in the middle of a pandemic and you know it will end, but you don't know how and you don't know when and you don't know how long and what will be left when it is all over. Will I still have my friends, my job, my life savings? It's being a senior in high school facing the loss of so many things that you would look forward to, thinking, "I know he promises

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that he is going to use this for good, but I cannot imagine any possible way right now that there can be any good coming from this."

Most of life is Saturday in between the tragedy and the triumph and we are in a Saturday kind of season right now. That is for sure not what we expect and it's not what we want. But Jesus will redeem, renew, revive, bring good out of bad and we will be better people and a better church because of it. If we are all in, in following him.

So BelPres, here's your homework for this week for Holy Week. Here's your homework. Two things. First, participate in Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter services. On Thursday we're going to have communion, so get some bread and get some juice or wine or whatever your deal is. On Thursday night, as part of the service, we'll take communion together all over living rooms in King County, all over the place and beyond, wherever you are. Participate online in all of those services Thursday night, Friday night and next Sunday.

Then second for homework, I am calling us as a church to pray and, if you feel so led, to fast during Holy Week. You can fast from food for a day. You maybe skip a meal every day of the week. To my knowledge, we've never fasted together as a church. I think something different happens when we couple prayer with fasting. I think we go to a different place, a little more connected to God, at least for me, because the hunger reminds me that I need God. If I feel a little weak in my body, it reminds me that I need God, that I am not self-sufficient.

Now I will say that probably this isn't the right time to do a long, multiple-day fast because we need our bodies to be healthy and strong. But this week, a one-day fast or maybe skip a meal every day, maybe fast from the news. That might be a good idea. Maybe fast from social media. That's probably a good idea. Then pray this week. Lots of praying.

I think the timing of this epidemic is kind of interesting for us as a church because here we've been since January talking about what it means to be an all-in follower of Jesus. Now more than ever, we need to be all in because we need Jesus' hope and courage and healing. But also now more than ever, our world needs all-in followers of Jesus because a scared world needs a fearless church.

So pray, pray about how you can be all in. Maybe it's to get out of consumer Christianity or tell more people about Jesus. Maybe it's praying about how God will lead you to respond to this pandemic by how you serve others. Maybe it's to become a prayer warrior throughout this entire pandemic. Pray that God brings revival and many people to Christ because of it. Pray for healthcare workers, grocery store workers who are at risk. Pray for an end to this pandemic. Pray a lot this week on your own.

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Then we're also going to pray together. Every day at 1:00 in the afternoon, we're going to post a video to social media of me or someone else on-staff praying with someone else as a reminder for us all to pray together at 1:00, pray as one at 1:00. If you don't do social media or you can't join us at 1:00, the links to those videos will also be on our website.

Now pray other times than at 1:00, pray longer than those videos are going to be. But also if you can join us, pray as one at 1:00 all the days of this week as a way of drawing closer to God and hearing from him how he wants us to be all in through this pandemic.

Few months ago, I got together with a guy who used to be a student in my college ministry back in the day in California. He was up here on business so we got together. Getting together with him reminded me of his story, which is very much a Holy Week story.

His whole life. His mother was a severe alcoholic, so bad actually that sometimes she would end up living on the streets. His father didn't much want him and so he was kind of bounced growing up. He was bounced from relative to relative. He lived for a while with an aunt who told him that the whole reason that things were going wrong, that all of his problems were because he didn't have enough faith and because he was so sinful and because he didn't pray hard enough. That's why his mom was an alcoholic.

So in college, his view was that if you just prayed harder and harder and harder, his mom would get better from being an alcoholic. It was kind of a Palm Sunday kind of faith that had been given to him by his aunt. "Jesus, do exactly what I tell you to do. If I just pray hard enough, I can bribe you into doing what I want you to do."

Instead, his mom died of alcohol poisoning and that plunged him into a faith crisis. Why didn't God answer his prayer? Why didn't God override his mother's free will and make her to stop drinking? He was mad at God, but at the same time he felt like there was no way that God could love him because he had not experienced a ton of love in his life.

I'd meet with him once a week to talk about his life and God and the Bible, and he had this interesting way of reading scripture. He'd go through the Bible and find all the places where God seemed mean, where God maybe gave a rule or where God was angry and then he'd come to me. He'd show them to me and he'd say, "See? See? God is not good. God is angry. God is mean. He's not good."

So I'd explain how God is like a good coach who gives us disciplines so that we can grow and become everything we're created to be and how God gets angry at sin because he loves people and he hates how sin hurts them. I'd explain it, he didn't even listen, right? He just keep pointing to another passage where God seemed mean.

Finally, I just started quoting Bible verses back to him. "God is gracious and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love." Then he would just show me another place where God was mean, right? Then I quote another verse like, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." We'd go back and forth and we'd do this every week.

Finally, I said, "This isn't helpful, okay? You don't want to get in a Bible quoting contest with a preacher. You're going to lose." Which is why I don't do our pastoral care here. That's not my greatest gift, right? My point was there's way more in the Bible about God's love than about anything else.

At the end of each meeting, every week, there's nothing else I could do. I just put my arm around him and pray for him. It was all I could do. We did this for three years. He was in a Maundy Thursday kind of place, disappointed with God, feeling like God did not and could not love him for three years.

But then in his senior year, things started to change a little bit. He started to notice the places in the Bible where God is loving, which far outnumber anything else, right? He started to just notice they started to sink in. He made some really close friends. Not just buddies, not just pals. People who knew all of his stuff, all of his dirt, loved him anyway. He got a great summer internship and I remember saying to him, "Do you think that maybe you got this and this maybe is a way that God is trying to say that he loves you?" I remember him going, "Maybe."

Then there was a girl. A girl always helps and she loved him, flaws and all. She thought he was the best thing she'd ever seen and God used all of that. None of those things changed him. But God changed him. But he used all of that to kind of start to give him a different life. And slowly this student began to say, "Maybe God loves me, too." He began to feel a little bit closer to God. Not every day, but sometimes.

Toward the end of his senior year, he got all kinds of great job offers, all of which he ended up turning down because he wanted to go be an intern in youth ministry for a while to help kids who were struggling. As he did that youth ministry, one of the things he discovered is he is especially gifted at helping people who have deep pain in their life and who are going through really hard things. He was especially gifted at helping those people because you got to go there to know there. He had been there in one of the darkest places and so he could help others in dark places as well.

He also ended up with a deeper theology, one that could withstand the worst that life can dish out and understanding that God himself suffered on the cross, but that he transformed it into something redemptive.

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When we met this summer, it's many years later, all these years later, now he's in business and he's married to that woman that he dated in college and they are all-in followers of Jesus. They serve sacrificially. They deliberately limit their spending so they can give as much as possible to the work of God in the world. God pulled so much good out of so much bad, closer relationship to God, deeper friendships, a story that he can use to help others, a theology that is more robust. So much good came out of all of that bad.

At the end of his long three-year ordeal, he sent me a picture of me baptizing him just a few months before his mom died and I baptized him. When I did this, he was in the middle of his wrestling with God. He was in the middle of being angry at God, disappointed with God, but he wanted to get baptized as kind of a statement of faith to say, "God, even though I am frustrated right now, even though I am discouraged right now, God, I want to believe in you and I'm trying, God. I'm trying to be all-in."

When his long dark night of the soul was over, he sent me this picture. I keep this picture in my office to remind me, deliberately to remind me that even in the most difficult moments when I can't see him, God is still present, God is still moving. God is still working in my life to make me whole and holy and bring good out of all that is bad.

My student went from having a Palm Sunday kind of faith to a Maundy Thursday disappointment, through a whole lot of things, being crucified, to a resurrection of so much good and in-between it all, three long years of Saturday.

So maybe right now some of you are in a Palm Sunday kind of place, hoping that Jesus is going to get on-board and bless your agenda. Or maybe you're feeling frustrated with God or unlovable because of something you've done or something you haven't done. Or maybe you're in a Saturday kind of place between a really hard time and a promise that, at best, you can only half-believe right now. Know this, this God's Easter power is still at work and he will use even the worst of tragedies to bring about his good and he always has one more move. Because no matter how dark, no matter how bleak Saturday gets, Sunday's coming because with Jesus, it always does.

So Jesus, thank you for this promise. Help us to hang on to it, make it real for us. Lord, give us real hope, real hope that is not based on false hopes, but on you and the fact that Jesus, you are our rock. You are our redeemer. You are our resurrection. Lord, you revive, you renew. God, you sustain.

Thank you for all of that and help us to experience Jesus in a way that makes us different. Lord, as we pray, as we fast, as we go through Holy Week, God, ask that you meet us in a deeper way and give us courage and give us hope and give us your indestructible joy in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Acts 16:6-34

On Palm Sunday the crowds cheer for Jesus because they think he's come to do what they want him to do, which was to lead armed resistance to defeat the occupying Roman Army. By the end of the week, they turn on him because he did not give them what they wanted.

1. In this current season, what is it you hope Jesus will do for you? How do you feel when he does do what you want him to do? How do you feel when he doesn't?
2. What is giving you hope in this season?