

JOURNEY OF HOPE

PALM SUNDAY



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Luke 9:51

Palm Sunday

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The days draw near

When Jesus approached Jerusalem, those who were with him celebrated. If they knew what he knew, however, if they knew what he tried to tell some of them, they probably wouldn't have been so enthusiastic. Jesus, in fact, was going to Jerusalem to die—which reminds us, among other things, that Jesus' fate awaits us all. No, we won't die as he died, but we will die—unless he comes back first, of course. The grave awaits us all.

Some of you may be thinking, "Great! Palm Sunday and he's preaching about death!" Moreover, our junior high school and high school students, who are with us in the service this morning, may be thinking, "What does this have to do with me? My life is in front of me." Note, however, the title of the sermon: "Journey of Hope." Give me a chance!

If Jesus' fate awaits us all, how then should we live?

Filmmaker Woody Allen answers the question:

*"Distraction. I'm obsessed with: Can I get this actress or my third act to work? I'm distracted. I'm interested in that, so I don't sit home and think, 'Gee, life is meaningless. We're all going to die. The universe is pulling apart at breakneck speed.' So I'm distracted with relatively solvable trivia."*¹

Although I admire Woody Allen's honesty, and I enjoy listening him riff on death, I think we can do better than that. One verse in the New Testament, which opens us up to enormous possibilities, helps us do better. If we backtrack from the so-called Triumphal Entry to the point in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus decided to journey to Jerusalem, we come to:

Luke 9:51:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

The days were drawing near for Jesus to be "taken up," which is actually one word in the language of the New Testament. It can connote death, but it can also connote ascension. It seems likely that in this case, both meanings are loaded into the same word. As it would play out, of course, Jesus would be crucified, God would raise him from the dead, and he would ascend to heaven, where he now reigns as the Lord of the world (Acts 1:2, 11, 22). Jesus "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross," but God "highly exalted him" and bestowed on him the name "Lord" (Philippians 2:5-11).

The "taking up" is connected with Jerusalem, and Moses and Elijah spoke literally of Jesus' "exodus" in Jerusalem, which has to do with an exodus from this life to another kind of life beyond death, as the Israelites departed from Egypt in the exodus to a new kind of life as the people of God. Jesus, in fact, would effect a new exodus for Israel and for humanity, not from oppression in Egypt but from the oppression of evil: Satan, sin, and death.

Jesus sets his face

Luke employs an idiom—"set his face"—to convey resolve. That Jesus deemed it necessary to set his face implies that he knew temptations to turn his face away from his path lay ahead. In fact, he had already faced down some of those temptations in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). If being "taken up" involves death, especially the kind of death that awaited Jesus, it's easy to understand why one would want to turn away from it.

Why Jerusalem? You would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to meet with God, especially for one of the feasts. Indeed, Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, but when he met with his disciples in the upper room, he shockingly declared the traditional elements of the Passover meal to be his body and his blood. He was thus symbolizing the new Passover, the new Exodus, that he would effect in his death, resurrection, and ascension.

You would also go to Jerusalem to enthrone a king. In fact, when the pilgrims celebrated Jesus as he approached Jerusalem, they shouted, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38) Indeed, Jesus would be enthroned as the Christ, the king of Israel, though not as anyone expected, for his enthronement, not only as the Christ but also as Lord of the world, would be preceded by a brutal, shameful, God-forsaken death.

Later, before he reached Jerusalem, Jesus would say, “Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:33-34)

Jesus literally set his face to go “into” Jerusalem—into the heart of darkness. But why did he set his face? Because he understood from the prophet Isaiah that he was called to do so.

God helps the Servant of the Lord

Isaiah penned four Servant Songs, which marked out the vocation of the Servant of the Lord. Jesus realized that he was the Servant of the Lord. Listen to this part of the third Servant Song:

Isaiah 50:7-9:

**But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
8 He who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.
9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a
garment;
the moth will eat them up.**

Jesus set his face, resolving to go to Jerusalem. The Servant of the Lord said, “I have set my face like a flint,” in a resolute way, to obey God. Jesus, as the Servant of the Lord, is motivated to set his face to go to Jerusalem because he knows the Lord God helps him both by vindicating him and by being near to him.

Jesus told the Jewish council, which was interrogating him in Jerusalem, “But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69). Alluding to Daniel’s vision in Daniel 7:13-14, Jesus was telling the council that they could do whatever they wanted in their courtroom, but in God’s courtroom, the one that mattered, he would be vindicated, and the tables would be turned. When would he be seated at the right hand of the power of God? When he would ascend to heaven. Indeed, the days were drawing near for his ascension. The Lord God helped Jesus by vindicating him.

In Gethsemane, Jesus drew near to God, and God drew near to him. He prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” God answered by sending an angel from heaven to strengthen him (Luke 22:42-43). The Lord God helped Jesus by being near to him as his vindicator.

No matter how old you are, you are one day closer to the end than you were yesterday. If our days are drawing near, how then should we live?

Set your face

When the days drew near for Jesus, what did he do? He set his face toward Jerusalem. Inasmuch as our days are drawing near, how can we follow Jesus? Is there a way that we too can set our faces toward Jerusalem? I once visited Jerusalem, and before I did so, I guess you could say that I set my face toward Jerusalem. But I wasn’t inclined to think about Luke 9:51 before I went, nor would I be inclined to invoke Luke 9:51 if I were to take another trip to Jerusalem. There is, however, another Jerusalem that the Scriptures speak of.

The “new Jerusalem” will one day “come down out of heaven from God” as part of the new creation (Revelation 21:2,10). If you have given your allegiance to Jesus, you are on your way to this city, which will be your eternal home. The Father sent Jesus into the world, and then he sent him to Jerusalem. Likewise, Jesus sends us in the world, and as he does so, he orients us toward the new Jerusalem.

The apostle John passes on his vision of the new Jerusalem to us to ignite our imaginations—so that the new Jerusalem will attract us to it and exert its influence on us even now. (See my sermon on Revelation 21:1-22:5: https://www.pbc.org/files/5845091a9ad2b149c6f68c49/20130519_WEB_Format.pdf.) If you're taking a trip to some place that you're looking forward to visiting, doesn't the very prospect of the trip fill you with anticipation?

What makes this city so great? Consider this: when you get there, "all will be well, and all manner of things will be well," in the words of Julian of Norwich. Life has its challenges, even its crushing heartaches, but take them with you on the way to the new Jerusalem. Watch for what God will do with them, first along the way and finally when you arrive, when he will "wipe away every tear" (Revelation 21:4).

But what does the journey toward the destination have to do with the destination itself? In fact, everything involved in the journey is wrapped up in the destination.

Many people have found Romans 8:28, applied in trite ways, to be more harmful than helpful: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." When you put the jewel in its setting, though, it sparkles and shines.

God's good purpose, in the setting of Romans 8, is the glorification of his people in the new creation, when God's people will be all that they're supposed to be and will do all that they're supposed to do. God draws up everything, even suffering, into his good purpose so that everything, even suffering, in actuality contributes to the accomplishment of his good purpose. The journey, then, is connected to—and even wrapped up in—the destination.

If God even uses suffering to achieve this glorious end, shouldn't we who set our faces toward the new Jerusalem do so with hope? And is not the hope of your heart bigger than this world? Hope gives us strength and vision and purpose for the journey. In the end, as fully glorified men and women, everything that we want to be and do and everything that God wants us to be and do will be one and the same. Until then, keep your eyes peeled for glimpses of God's goodness.

Let me speak to the students here for a moment. Many of you, as teenagers, will feel things very deeply. Some of you will be prone to despair. Here's what you need to know: God is going to use that despair. He's going to gather it up into his eternal purposes so that you will be all that you're supposed to be and do all that you're supposed to do.

Set your face toward the new Jerusalem. It may be dark here at times, but it's light there, so light, in fact, that the city doesn't even need the sun or the moon, "for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is that Lamb"—that is, Jesus (Revelation 21:23).

When you set your face toward the new Jerusalem, God helps you. How so? The same way he helped the Servant of the Lord, Jesus. By the way, New Testament authors apply the Servant Songs of Isaiah not only to Christ but those who are in Christ. We who are in Christ are servants of the Lord.

God vindicates you

First, when you set your face toward the new Jerusalem, God helps you by vindicating you. If you believe in Jesus, God justifies you—that is, he declares that you belong to him—in advance of the final day, when he will vindicate you, when it becomes apparent to all that you belong to him.

Western culture has by and large endeavored to remove any concept of guilt before God, but educator and author William M. McClay observes this paradox:

Guilt has not merely lingered. It has grown, even metastasized, into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West, even as the rich language formerly used to define it has withered and faded from discourse, and the means of containing its effects, let alone obtaining relief from it, have become ever more elusive.

McClay further observes,

*Indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate how many of the deeds of individual men and women can be traced back to the powerful and inextinguishable need of human beings to feel morally justified, to feel themselves to be 'right in the world.'*²

Apart from a forgiving God, they don't know how to feel right in the world anymore, except, McClay contends, by claiming the status of victim, because if you're a certifiable victim, then you can't be held morally responsible.

Paul, on the other hand, thunders, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). There is a God, and we all stand guilty before him, but if we are in Christ Jesus, God does not condemn us.

How about human condemnation? Paul asks, "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect?" (Romans 8:33) Answer: It doesn't matter. If there is no divine condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and human condemnation is irrelevant, that means there is no room for self-condemnation. If you're like me, you're your own harshest critic and worst enemy. Perhaps you want to set off for the new Jerusalem, but feelings of condemnation hold you back.

Many high school students in this area feel the pressure. A Gunn High School student, who was quoted in *San Francisco Magazine* recently, said, "I feel like I'm never doing enough, not using my time wisely, not working hard enough. It goes deep, this disappointment in ourselves."³ We have to realize that many of our young people feel this way. The girl speaks not only for herself but also for many of her classmates, and, let's face it, for many adults as well.

The Gospel says, simply, "You are enough. The pressure's off." Now, be on your way.

First, when you set your face to go to the new Jerusalem, God helps you by vindicating you. Second, he helps you by being near to you.

God is near to you

The psalmist prays to God in Psalm 73:25, "Whom have I in heaven but you? / And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."

He cannot mean that there is nothing else on earth that he desires, even if some of those desires (for food, water, clothing, shelter, protection, and sex, for example) are used in the Scriptures as metaphors for desire for God. Yes, God made us as creatures of desire so that we would seek him. The psalmist must mean that he desires God above all else. He literally says, "But for me, the nearness of God is my good" (Psalm 73:25, 28).

On the one hand, for those who are in Christ Jesus, God is always near. God dwells in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17). He can't get any closer than that. Nevertheless, we don't always experience him as near. In fact, more often than not, most believers probably live most of their lives unaware of God's presence and don't often experience him as near. I confess, such has been my experience. And yet . . .

I've had my moments. In some of those moments, I have experienced the presence of God in breathtaking ways. Something of what I will experience in the new Jerusalem I have experienced in fleeting moments here. In those moments, I have been so overwhelmed by God's love for me that I would have agreed with the Psalmist: "there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you." Moreover, because I have experienced God in such ways, I'm reminded that whatever else I experience in this life cannot be compared to his nearness, which I will experience ceaselessly in the new Jerusalem. When I am reminded in this way, I'm encouraged to set my face toward the new Jerusalem. "All the vain things that charm me most, / I sacrifice them to his blood."⁴

On a spiritual retreat one day a few years back, I woke up with Luke 15:31, from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, on my mind: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (my translation).

I sensed that the Father was speaking these words to me. I looked out my window, to the Tomales Bay below and to the hills beyond, and beyond the hills to the endless horizon. At sunrise, it dawned on me—as it had never dawned on me before—that God has already given me everything. The Tomales Bay, the hills, the horizon, the heavens and the earth: God created everything for us. Although the heavens and the earth groan because we rebelled against God, God promises to re-create them. All creation is mine. I am with the Father, even now. God is near.

I spent the next four hours reveling in Luke 15:31. I meditated on the Father's love for me. I delighted in what he has given me and what he will give me.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*⁵

Enchanting angels

Our days are drawing near. Therefore, set your face toward the new Jerusalem. When you do so, the Lord God helps you by vindicating you and by being near to you.

Finally, let us turn from one storyteller to another: from Woody Allen, whom we heard from at the outset, to Isak Dinesen. Who? Isak Dinesen, who wrote *Babette's Feast*, a quirky short story that was made into an equally quirky film by the same title. In her dying years, barely able to eat and weighing only eighty pounds, she wrote the story to make sense of the suffering in her life.

In *Babette's Feast*, an aging opera singer, long past his prime, writes to a woman he had met fifteen years earlier when visiting a small village in Norway. Back then, the woman's voice made his spirits soar. He dreamed of taking her to Paris and singing with her on the stage of the Grand Opera, but it was all too much for the woman, who felt bound to her village, her family, and her rigid Christian sect. Achille Papin, the aging opera singer, writes to Philippa:

*What is fame? What is glory? The grave awaits us all. And yet, as I write this, I feel that the grave is not the end. In Paradise, I shall hear your voice again. There you will sing, without fears or scruples, as God meant you to sing. There you will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah! How you will enchant the angels.*⁶

Indeed, how we will enchant the angels. Set your face toward the new Jerusalem.

Endnotes

¹ Coyle, Jack. *Woody's Grim Life View Keeps Him Hart at Work*. San Jose Mercury News, E5. 6 July 2012.

² McClay, William M. "The Strange Persistence of Guilt." *Hedgehog Review*, Spring 2017, vol 19, issue 1.

³ Kapp, Diana. "Why are Palo Alto's Kids Killing Themselves?" *San Francisco Magazine*. 18 May 2015.

⁴ Watts, Isaac. "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." 1707.

⁵ Dinesen, Isak. *Babette's Feast*. Penguin Books, 2011. 14.