



Sunday of the Passion  
24 March 2024

March Madness

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen. Well, my friends – March Madness is upon us. Lazarus is raised. Today a parade. Bread and wine – a Last Supper - in an upper room on Thursday. Feet will be washed. A friend will betray. Prayers will be said in the garden of Gethsemane. An arrest will be made. A cross will be carried. A crucifixion will kill on Friday. A disciple will deny. Friends will abandon. A criminal will beg to be remembered. A mother will be united with her son. We will be forgiven. Thirst will be quenched. A spirit will be commended. A curtain will tear. Darkness will cover. An earthquake will pronounce him dead. A private graveside will be attended by a mother and a few loyal friends. And a stone will roll to seal the grave. Yes, March Madness is upon us. The Golden Grizzlies of Oakland University have upset the brackets of many college basketball fans, not the least of these being Pastor Tony Acompanado. My oldest child and youngest child are consumed with every basketball game – watching on the Living Room TV, my iPad, and on at least one of the iPhones in our house - all at the same time. The games of the Sweet 16 will argue for attention as the events of Holy Week take center stage this coming Thursday and Friday. And after the shouts of resurrection joy on Easter morning we will revel in the joy of a risen Savior as the games of the Elite 8 play out on our way to the Final Four. Yes, March Madness is upon us. But before we rush to the end of the story, we join a parade already in progress today. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!

The Mount of Olives stands across the Kidron Valley from the city of peace, Jerusalem. Just yesterday, in the village of Bethany on the Mount of Olives, a man was raised from the dead. Word of the resurrection spread like wildfire and now the rumors of Lazarus being raised from the dead have called people to the city walls and streets of Jerusalem. They are waiting for the One who they say raised his friend Lazarus out of the grave. Across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, Jesus gathers with his disciples. At the crest of the Mount of Olives, the donkey, waits for its rider. The prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament tells us: Rejoice greatly, daughter Zion! Shout, daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Jesus fulfills the prophecy. Jesus begins the journey to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. The people waiting on the city walls can see his movement – prodding the donkey along. Jesus and his disciples will make their way down the Mount of Olives and into the Kidron Valley. Finally, at the lowest point in the valley, Jesus, his disciples, even the donkey will begin to lift their heads to the towering city above. Jesus will remember the words of the Psalmist, “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come. My help comes from the Lord the maker of heaven and earth.”

It is their journey up Mount Zion towards the city gates where Jesus will begin to see the crowds of people gathered to greet him. Palm branches will wave, signifying the expectation and welcome of royalty, cloaks will fall to the ground, honoring the One who is coming. And the crowd will begin to shout, “Blessed is the One who...comes in the name of the Lord!” When a king made his entrance into a city and his purpose was to conquer that city, he always rode on a great stallion. When a king was coming in peace, he would ride on the back of a donkey. Jesus was arriving in Jerusalem in fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy, to proclaim the time when all people can make peace with God, by experiencing the forgiveness of their sins. We take our sinfulness in stride. Most of us. We hold to our beliefs and ideologies – even when they may stand in direct opposition to the One we have come to worship this day. We believe we can do everything ourselves, on our own – even when we find ourselves so overwhelmed that we find it easier to fail than to surrender to our need for God. We pretend we do not see what God calls us to tend – even when our pretending turns to denial becoming apathy separating us from the mission and ministry entrusted us from the moment of our baptism. We worship on occasion, appreciate enough a word of forgiveness, give enough to ease our guilt, but our sacrifice is often too little - even as our God calls us to deny ourselves and pick up our cross and follow. Yes, March Madness is upon us, and this parade is where we find ourselves wondering if this Jesus will truly be the One we hope him to be. The prophet Isaiah tells us: Surely it is God who saves me, I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense and he will be my Savior.



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I walked into Lowes, this past week, to purchase my yearly allotment of palm plants to prepare for the beginning of Holy Week. There are usually 6-12 palm plants – many of them are taller than I am – and when I walk up to the counter dragging two carts of palms through the aisles of Lowes, I get more than a few strange looks coming my way. When I walked up to the cashier she commented on the beauty of the palms, asking me if I was doing some outside decorating. And I thought to myself – well since it is snowing outside these palm plants would not last very long. I smiled and shared with her that I was preparing to decorate for Palm Sunday at church and her face lit up. “Oh, of course,” she said. “Holy Week is coming.” I could not have been more pleased to hear her acknowledgement. She followed me to the doors of the store and said, “Happy Easter.” I could have hugged her for her unknown blessing of encouragement. I simply turned back to face her, looking through the palm plants, and shared the same blessing. It felt strange to view this woman through the palm fronds to wish her a “Happy Easter,” knowing all that was about to happen this week, and yet, for those of us on this side of the resurrection, the question is “why don’t we carry those words of joy with us – always? There are moments in our worship life, where we begin our worship with the words: “This is the day that the Lord has made...let us rejoice and be glad in it.” It turns out that those words come from Psalm 118: 24 and that the psalmist wrote those words as a word of prophecy promising us this day – the entry of the Son of God into the holy city. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And still there is more. Psalm 118 is also used in our funeral liturgy. Someone knew what they were doing. “Open to me the gates of righteous and I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord, through which the righteous may enter. The same words that announce the arrival of the Savior of the world into the holy city on this Palm Sunday are the same words that are spoken at the graveside to remind us that the grave is nothing more than the gates to the Kingdom of God. How shall we follow our Savior through the city gates knowing he is preparing for his death while at the same time preparing us for eternal life?

My friends, there is no shortage of struggle this day as we make our way through the gates of the city to shouts of Hosanna. A good friend of mine who is about to turn forty shared with me that his mother in her early sixties is dealing with a very aggressive onset of Alzheimer’s. The husband of another friend is dying of cancer. A friend I deeply care about is paralyzed by their grief. A relationship between two dear friends is crumbling. The hostages held by Hamas are waking up their 169th day in Hamas captivity as more than 60% of Gaza has been flattened in those same 169 days. Russia and Ukraine have been at war for the last 759 days. And it was 1965 – the last time that Jerusalem – all of Israel - knew a long period of peace.

Yes, March Madness is upon us. And as we enter the city gates, following in the slow, steady steps of the donkey who carries our Savior, I need the words of the prophet Isaiah to ring in my ears again and again, “Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense and he will be my savior.” And perhaps an early “Happy Easter” to give me strength for the days to come. Holy Week is coming. And is now here. This is the day that the Lord has made...Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.