

† I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

### I. TWO WEEKS WE HEARD that Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey.

It's his triumphal entry into Jerusalem — exactly what we recall on Palm Sunday. But there is only one reason Jesus enters Jerusalem — to pour out his life in death for his people.

That's why we hear this passage during Holy Week & during Advent. We cannot separate Christ's coming into this world as an infant, born of the virgin Mary, from *the reason why* he came, which was to give up his life for his people. And remember again from last week, him giving up his life is not an outlier, not an exception, but the rule itself — God eternally pours himself out for those whom he loves. This is who God is. This is who Jesus is.

How might any other king have entered Jerusalem? We would expect any other king to enter *victoriously*, which would mean a war-horse. What other way would there be for a king to enter Roman occupied Jerusalem than as a conqueror on a war-horse? Or to put it differently, what other king could have pulled off entering Jerusalem without a war party? What king would have lasted as long as Jesus — nearly a week — without a war party?

All this is to point out that Jesus enters humbly and *in peace*. For he brings the very peace of God.

We are, at present, invited into the very peace of God. But a time is coming — Christ's return — when that time will be up, when peace will no longer be available to those who have refused it. For now, this peace continues to be on offer to any who will receive it.

### II. LAST WEEK WE HEARD that signs will precede Christ's return in glory.

These signs are there to signal that the Kingdom of God is near, that Christ's return is near — and that therefore our redemption is *near*.

These signs, for the Christian, however ominous they may be, however terrifying they may seem, nevertheless represent *hope* for the believer.

Yet, at Christ's return in Glory, we do not want to be found unprepared, unready, caught off-guard. We do not want to be like the disobedient children whose parents have been away but have now begun to pull into the driveway. We do not want to be found having wasted the hot coals of our faith on matters that keep us from faith, whose hot coals have now become cool to the touch. Neither does the Lord want us to be unready, unprepared, and so, the Lord has given us signs as reminders of his return.

The *usual* signs of the sun, moon, and stars themselves remind us to keep alert, to be prepared.

Over a week ago, we were treated to a Supermoon, when the moon is a bit closer to the earth, and thus, appears a bit larger. It always seems a bit spookier that way, especially when it's not pure white, especially when it's got hues of orange. It's supposed to be a bit spookier. One day, the moon will actually be *too* close. And its natural orbit is preparing us, reminding us, helping us to anticipate that day that is coming — the dawn of Christ in glory.

So, too, the eclipses are given; so, too, the tumult of the nations; so, too, the crescendoing waves. These regular signs are given for us to be *regularly reminded* of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory, who does not want any one of us to be unaware about his return, or to be caught faithless.

None of us — except those who have kept the faith — will find success at Christ's return. And so, being reminded by the signs of the sun and moon and stars, we cast aside the sin, busyness, & the anxieties of this life, all that which keeps us from cooling the burning hot coals of our faith.

### **III. THIS MORNING WE HEARD** John the Baptist ask Jesus a startling question: "Are you the one who is to come?"

Jesus, in usual fashion, doesn't give an immediate, simple "yes" or "no." In Jesus' response, we hear that John the Baptist is even more than a prophet; he is *the messenger*. This should give us pause. How could John be greater than the prophets, greater than Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah? Well—All *these* prophets told of the one who was to come. John's message is different: the one who was to come *has arrived, is at hand, is now here*.

The prophets foretold of the one who was to come — the one who would be a greater Moses, the one who would be David's greater son; the one would be the Shepherd, the sun of Righteousness—and many other wonderful names for the Christ. Now, no longer are the people waiting — the Lord walks in their midst. That should hearken us back to the Garden of Eden, back before the Fall, back when our Lord Jesus walked with Adam. Our Lord walks among his people, again.

But for John, there's a problem — he is in prison. And so, he sends messengers, his disciples, to Jesus to ask:

*"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"*

This, at first, puts us in a bit of a conundrum.

After all, John's mission since *before birth* has been to prepare the people of God for the way of the Lord. That is his mission from the Angel Gabriel. And he began this mission from the womb. While he was still in his mother Elizabeth's womb, while Jesus was still in Mary's womb, he prepared his own mother to receive Jesus, by leaping for joy at the sound of Mary's voice. And then, after little John was born, Zechariah prophesied that John would be the one who would prepare the way of the Lord.

And then, in John's Gospel, John the Baptist says this of Jesus:

*[29] The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! [30] This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me."* (John 1:29–30, ESV)

Everything about John's life was for this singular task: to prepare the way of the Lord.

And yet, after all these things — after the Angel Gabriel appear to his father, after his father prophesied about him, and after John has already called Jesus the "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" — John seems to waver in his faith, seems to lapse in his conviction that Jesus is *the* one who was to come.

Have you wrestled with doubt? Have you wrestled with your faith? Notice what John does about his question.

The first thing to notice is that John sends this question to Jesus because he trusts him, because he believes that he will hear the truth from him. "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Whatever doubts John may be having, he does not doubt that Jesus will tell him the truth. However Jesus responds, he will take to heart and believe. Whatever doubt may be present, John submits this directly to Jesus.

This is a clue for how to deal with our own doubt, should we have any doubt or should doubt arise in our faith. Whatever doubt may come our way, the best place for this doubt is in the hands of Jesus. We are reminded that when Thomas joined with the eleven disciples after the resurrection, Jesus directly addressed his doubt with him. If there is doubt in any of our hearts, the place to address it is with Jesus. And whatever doubts we may have about him, he knows, and he has answers, and he has his timing.

Many have speculated on just what the nature of John's doubt is. Many point out that the ministry of Jesus — specifically the way that he is the king — is so radically different than what would have been expected, that this is perhaps the nature of John's doubt. The thinking here is that Jesus would have already begun to take charge of the Temple and of Jerusalem and of the Kingdom. That he would have begun to defeat Herod & Caesar. Perhaps, so the thinking goes, "perhaps Jesus is not the Christ, since he is not doing this or that." There may be something to this, to be sure. But here is my take:

John is in prison. Jesus is performing miracles. And so, I think his question has more to do with the nature of his life's purpose, his life's mission. "Has my ministry been a success or a failure? Have I done the work entrusted to me well, or not? Have I gotten it right that Jesus is the Christ, or not?" "Why am I stuck *here*?"

Note that Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, puts it this way:

*"1 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful."*

It was not optional for the prophets, the priests, for the apostles, and for those to whom they entrusted their ministry — bishops, presbyters, deacons — to be faithful to that heritage of faith to which they were entrusted.

It's true that all Christians have been entrusted with the good news of Jesus, but not all Christians are judged according to the same standard. Those who have been entrusted with the ministry handed down by the apostles are held to the highest degree of fidelity. This applies to me — it's not optional for me to be unfaithful to this ministry to which I've been entrusted.

When men are unfaithful in their ministry — whether in proclamation of the good news or in the conduct of their lives — it mars the message of Jesus. It infuses doubt, double standards, and problems that have no place in the body of Christ. We can likely think of someone who has left the church because of the unfaithfulness & faithlessness of priests/pastors/bishops. Unfaithfulness has consequences.

But the impact of this unfaithfulness is not limited in scope to the spread of the gospel on earth; the unfaithfulness of the ministers of God's Word will be judged on the Last Day by the Lord himself. And that, I think, is the good news that those who have left the church because of men in ministry need to hear. The good news for them is that no one will get away with being an unfaithful steward. There is no one more gracious than the Lord Himself, and there is no one more severe than him, either. He has the power to banish to hell, and he will banish some there, and those will be banished forever. Justice is coming.

John, in prison, wants to know — more than anything else — whether he has been a faithful steward. *If* he has correctly identified Jesus as the Christ, as the one who was to come, then he can remain in prison and go to his death in peace. But if he has incorrectly identified the Christ as Jesus, then he has work to do, for his ministry — his purpose and existence in this world, given to him by the very angel Gabriel of God — has been a failure. He will need to get back to work, back to discipling, back to baptizing and calling for repentance, and he will have to identify someone else as the Christ for God's people.

And so, notice how Jesus responds — he in no way belittles John or begrudges him his question. Instead he elevates John and reinforces his ministry — John is the Elijah who was to come; John is the one who was to prepare the way of the Lord. By identifying John as the Messenger, Jesus identifies himself — the one whom John pointed to — as the Christ. Jesus, by saying that John is the Elijah who was to come, has also said: "I am the Christ, the one promised from of old."

The evidence is the ministry that Jesus has been doing: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus comes to make all things new. What he has done in his ministry is to demonstrate his power to make all things new through giving the blind their sight, making the lame walk, healing the lepers, making the deaf hear, raising the dead, and giving good news to the poor. In other words, these are same things that we should expect going forward, in the kingdom that is to come. There cannot and will not be blindness, lameness, disease, deafness, death, or poverty in the life that is to come. The proof is in the healings that Jesus does while he walks among his people.

Every death, every disease, everything that has gone wrong with the world is possible only because death has entered the world through sin. The only way the whole world is saved is by the complete and total unraveling of

sin, such that sin collapses in on itself, such that sin becomes impossible, such that death becomes empty, such that all that is left is life.

John the Baptist's ministry is coming to a swift end—he is in prison; soon his head will be cut off. But his ministry has not been in vain; John is no failure. As Jesus has reassured him, his ministry has been astoundingly successful. For he has successfully prepared the way for the people to receive the Lord Jesus.

This is a key reminder that success in ministry is not obvious to us and cannot be judged by the metrics of the world. A large, thriving church with a beautifully produced service may not be successful in God's perspective. A small, fading church with a meagerly put together service may not be a failure in God's perspective.

Paul gives us the blueprint for our metric of success: to steward the mystery of faith—the good news—faithfully. That means that I must keep the faith, that I must proclaim the good news in season and out of season, and that I must encourage those entrusted to this congregation to remain in the faith. But the whole body of Christ is needed. Faith cannot be done alone. The Lord needs more than pastors—he needs the whole people of God to join together as his body to carry out his mission in this world.

And for the season of Advent, we can put the mission like this: to prepare *this congregation* and those whom we encounter to be ready for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For Christ has come. **Christ is coming. Christ will come again.**

† **All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.**