

St James United Church



Message for April 13, 2025

Palm Sunday

“He Comes Down to Lift Us Up” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

John 12:12-18

That is quite a contrast isn't it. We sang “All Glory Laud and Honour” then almost immediately sang a song about Jesus' death. There is a tension in that every year, and it is tempting to skip over the cross and sing only about glory. But we can't. Which is why we have spent so much of this Lent focused on the cross. So much so we did things a little bit differently this year. Did you notice that we included the cross in the last portion of the procession. We were led by that cross.

I'm wondering if you noticed another change. We used a different version of Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem than Matthew, Mark or Luke. It was still about his coming to Jerusalem so you'd be forgiven for not noticing. But this year we heard John's Gospel. We started this shift last week when we read about Mary anointing Jesus' feet. I thought we should continue through to Easter.

John makes significant changes to the story, one that even involves a change from his typical tone. Most people love John because he is usually lifting Jesus into the clouds, emphasizing his shared relationship with God. He returns to that in the next few chapters, but today, Jesus feels very grounded. In Matthew, Luke or Mark, Jesus' riding a donkey is planned, he even draws on divine insight to tell his disciples where to find the donkey, what to do when people oppose him taking the donkey, that the people will let them take the donkey. Everything seems to be divinely orchestrated, fulfilling of prophecy. But not in John's version. In his, Jesus makes the decision to ride a donkey part way through, seemingly motivated by another change John makes, the crowd not just cheering Hosanna, but calling Jesus a king. We sang that image of Jesus several times in our last hymn. What does that title mean? Jesus shows us. With that title ringing in his ears, he gets on a donkey, and not even a donkey but a donkey cold that he sees along the way, drawing on his knowledge of the prophets, of Zechariah saying the king comes riding on the colt of a donkey. He seems to be fulfilling prophecy.

But I think he also wants to show them not just that his ministry comes from God but to model its significance. It's like he's saying, “You call me a king? Then let me show you what that should

look like.” Normally a king rides on a horse. That is an animal that evokes power, strength. You look down on people when you are on a horse. It is ridden in warfare too, effectively so. But the donkey is none of that. It is used for domestic chores, transporting goods, assisting in day-to-day work. It’s not tall. When you sit on it you are barely above people’s heads. I think Jesus wanted to remind them that he was with them, understood them, their hopes and hurts, he did not want to dominate them but lift them up with him. He was saying kingship should model humility and lead us into peace, that it should be shared, is about service and love, about letting go for others. That’s what kingship should be, and how we should be with each other.

This is a message he’ll speak to later about being a seed that dies to bear fruit, will model to his disciples when he washes their feet, when he doesn’t want anyone harmed at his arrest. But it all has a purpose, why John normally kept focused on where Jesus comes from but in this moment keeps him firmly grounded. He expresses it in a passage a couple of chapters later, part of a lengthy farewell speech we only get in John. Jesus prays: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us....The glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

He is revealing why he came, revealing the meaning of the cross that has been going ahead of us these weeks. It is so we can share in God’s life. He makes this a possibility by not being above us but coming down to us. He comes down to lift us up. He comes down and embraces everything about us, even that which is most painful, to hold it all in love and lift us up as he is lifted up on the cross and then in resurrection. He comes down to restore our life in God.

As he does this, he invites us to live that in our lives, to hold each other in love as we release our need for dominance and instead to lift each other up as well. We don’t do it on our own but as we are joined to him in his cross, he does it through us. Friends, that is what these weeks have been about. Friends, that is what this coming week is about. Friends, that is ultimately what our lives are to be about. So, this week let us draw closer to the cross. It is where he comes down to lift us up, to lift everyone up, to lift the whole world up in love. Amen.