



PLOT PALMS PASSION

A JOURNEY TO EASTER

PLOT/PALMS/PASSION: A JOURNEY TO EASTER
ADAM DAVIDSON

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FOREWORD

Stories shape us. When I tell my kids stories about my childhood, they learn about the events that shaped my life and made me who I am. Through the years, they've heard the same stories a time or two (*or five*) and are familiar enough that they subtly roll their eyes and finish the tale without any help. "Yeah, that was when you fell off your fort in the backyard and had to get stitches... your Grandma bought you Reese's from the vending machine at the hospital because you were so well behaved...we know, Dad. We know."

You've heard it before: "Familiarity breeds contempt." Teenagers are especially adept at this.

As we journey toward Resurrection Sunday we have a similar dilemma. We know the story of Easter so well that we can easily miss the depth and meaning of salvation. It's an annual story that we perhaps remember hearing from a young age, maybe on flannel graphs or portrayed in Easter pageants by congregational cast members wearing Roman soldier costumes or rhinestone-clad angel outfits, and Bible characters dressed in "period-era" bathrobes.

Always with the bathrobes.

However, there's too much at stake to miss the story of Easter this year. Easter Sunday is a miracle that nobody saw coming, not the disciples who heard Jesus constantly referring to his death and resurrection, not the crowds who shouted "hosanna!" one day and "crucify him!" the next, and certainly not the religious leaders who knew the Old Testament prophecies better than anybody else, yet completely missed the point. We don't want to miss the point.

At Central, our mission is to amplify the hope and life of Jesus. There is hope in the resurrection. There is life in Jesus. Easter may be a familiar story to most of us, but to a hurting world, this is the gospel marked by the most important event in human history. That being said, it might be good for us to **look at the story with fresh eyes**, to **seek renewed inspiration** from the Holy Spirit for our contemptuous souls, and to **realize the depth of love shown to us** on the cross combined with the victory of the empty tomb. Easter is only a couple weeks away. Imagine what God could do if we realized our need for the eyes of our hearts to be opened (Ephesians 1:18-19) and to experience resurrection power in our own lives! This would naturally overflow into our families, our workplaces and schools, our neighborhoods, and the world.

Jesus calls us to remember the familiar story with a fresh wind from the Holy Spirit. To see it differently, we would need to assume a certain position of our hearts, perhaps by taking on selective ignorance, acting as if we're experiencing these events for the first time. We need to put ourselves in the sandals of the people who watched things unfold moment by moment. They *didn't* know how it would end, even though they were told. Their emotions ran up and down like a roller coaster. In one moment, Jesus is freeing the demon-possessed and calling dead people back to life. Days later, a mob armed with swords and clubs emerges from the dark to arrest him. Their hopes were raised, their hopes were dashed. They were courageous; they were cowards. Jarring.

The religious leaders expected him to die. His disciples expected him to bring fire and restore the Kingdom of Israel. People expected to be healed. Crowds expected to be fed. The powers of darkness expected to win.

But nobody—*nobody*—expected a resurrection.

Pretend for a moment you don't know how the Jesus story resolves. Walk with Jesus in real time. Discipline yourself to live through these daily devotional readings with curiosity. Ponder as if you don't know what's next. If we spend the next two weeks with this heart posture, there's no telling how different Easter will be this year. Unless we're in

touch with the sacrifice of Jesus, aware of our own need for grace, and willing to walk the journey to the cross, we will never fully experience the celebration of Resurrection.

And what a celebration that will be!

Here's how it works: Daily readings include a scripture reading followed by some devotional thoughts. You can do these in as little as 10 minutes, as many as 30 minutes, or more. I encourage you to read the Bible passages before you read the devotionals, as related observations are made and questions are raised. Some readings include challenges to be considered and next steps to take. We will intentionally build tension together, not to be released until the celebration together on Easter Sunday.

Remember—this is not about mastering the scripture. Rather, this is about letting the scripture master you. May we read with intentionally ignorant eyes and receive a fresh wind from the Spirit, knowing this part of God's grand story of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ like never before.

Praying with you,

Adam Davidson

Pastor of GROW and fellow follower of Christ

Central Wesleyan Church

SUNDAY—APRIL 6

LAZARUS

READ JOHN 11:1-44

Imagine a downpour on a dark night. The wind howls as flashes of lightning briefly cut through the overwhelming darkness, followed by the deep rumble of thunder. You're watching the storm from the comfort of your warm, dry home when suddenly, your phone rings.

A friend has a flat tire and needs your help. You hesitate for a second—you're not AAA, after all. But you are a good friend, the kind who shows up when needed. Without a second thought, you grab your raincoat, dash to your car, and head out into the storm. Staying home doesn't even cross your mind. Your friend needs you.

This is exactly the kind of response people expected from Jesus when they sent the word: "Lord, the one you love is sick" (John 11:3). They didn't even mention Lazarus by name, assuming Jesus would drop everything and rush to his side.

But he didn't.

Even though he loved Lazarus and his family, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days. He is many things, but predictable isn't one of them. His faithfulness is certain, but the way he expresses it can be downright confusing. Why delay? Why let Lazarus die? It seems like Jesus is trying to make a bigger point.

Instead of arriving in time to heal Lazarus, Jesus shows up at what is essentially a funeral home, surrounded by grieving loved ones. Moved to tears himself, he displays both his humanity and his divinity—grieving loss while boldly declaring that Lazarus will rise again.

Even as a person of faith, I have to admit I probably would've been one of those people standing there, shaking my head and whispering

to those around me: *If Jesus had come when he was asked, all of this could have been avoided.* Be honest—would you have nodded in agreement? Would you have hesitated when Jesus told you to roll away the stone, knowing full well the stench of four days of decay was behind it?

Yet Jesus is so confident that, despite your doubts, you help move the stone. You hold your breath, maybe even plug your nose. Then Jesus prays—not for the sake of his own faith, but for yours—reminding everyone that the miracle they’re about to witness is proof that he is exactly who he claims to be.

Then, with a loud voice, he calls Lazarus out of the tomb.

And a suddenly alive Lazarus comes hopping out. Hopping, because he’s still wrapped in grave clothes. Imagine unwrapping his head, looking into his now bright, very alive eyes.

You’d never be the same.

This is the kind of story you’d tell for the rest of your life again and again—to anyone who would listen—even if they rolled their eyes while you described what Lazarus saw when he opened his.

This miracle wasn’t just about Lazarus. It was a preview of what was coming—when Jesus would do the exact same thing on Easter Sunday. But for now, we pretend we don’t know that yet. All we know is what we’ve seen and heard—and it’s as unbelievable as it is true.

Jesus, if you can raise the dead, then, to quote the song, “what can’t you do?”

Now, put yourself in the story. Imagine witnessing Lazarus’ resurrection. Remember Jesus’ words in John 11:40, “If you believe, you will see the glory of God.”

Now ask yourself: *If we can trust him with Lazarus, can we trust what he says about his own death and resurrection?*

If you answer with bold confidence, remember this—many of the same people who saw Lazarus walk out of his tomb ran as far away as possible when Jesus was placed in his.



Do you identify with a particular character in this story? How does their response remind you of what your own might be?

What does the fact that Jesus wept (John 11:35) say about him? About his view of us?

What's the symbolism of Jesus telling the crowd to untie Lazarus instead of doing it himself?

Read Hebrews 2:14-18. Consider how Jesus answers the problem of death by becoming one of us.

What might be going through the mind of Jesus as he raises his friend to life while knowing what's about to happen to him?

Prayer—Lord Jesus, I believe you are the resurrection and the life. I believe you are powerful enough to do anything and that with you all things are possible. Renew my heart and help me rely on your faithfulness more than I do my own strength. Amen.

MONDAY—APRIL 7

THE PLOT

JOHN 11:45-57

We were driving from Michigan to Florida when I finally lost my wits. Our kids were complaining from the back seats about everything from the sun—“it’s too bright!”—to our lack of Fritos (for some reason, everyone wanted Fritos and the last gas station was fresh out). The radio played country music from a local station, a musical genre that brings great division to our family. Even though the song was about happy things like moonlight and biscuits and gravy (I don’t remember what exactly, but this is the basic idea of every country song), nothing was going right as we rode in relative luxury to Michigan’s lowest and warmest peninsula. How good do things need to be in order to stop the complaints? When Cam shouted something about Carter blowing his nose in the wrong direction, a switch deep inside my head flipped—I’d had enough. We stopped at a rest area, not for one of my trademark dad-efficient pit stops but to actually rest and, quite frankly, take a break from each other. Maybe there would be Fritos in the dimly lit rest area vending machines.

I had enough.

Have you been there? Not at that rest area. I mean, have you been at that place where you have simply had enough?

When people watched Jesus tell Lazarus to hop on outta that grave and he did, grave clothes and all, it was no longer a question of whether Jesus really was the Son of God. He clearly had power beyond anything ever seen before, and with little to no hesitation, many people believed in Jesus. It wasn’t a difficult decision to make.

Of course, not everyone had the same response. Some took it upon themselves to go and tell the Pharisees, a group of legalistic keepers

of Mosaic tradition, all that had happened, knowing that it would be of great interest in their ongoing quest to get rid of Jesus.

Yes. People wanted to get rid of Jesus. He was a threat to the religious status quo. Generations of leaders had turned the laws of the Old Testament into an impossible code of conduct, guarded by the elites and used like a weapon to keep themselves “pure”, separated from the filthy masses of ordinary unclean people, with no regard for the intent of God’s call to holiness of heart. Jesus made control of “their” people and “their” temple difficult because locals in every town kept believing Jesus instead of playing by the religious rules. Time after time, a religious leader would openly question Jesus and time after time he easily took them down a peg or ten by calling out their hypocrisy in front of everybody. Jesus was a nuisance, a pain in the priestly sash, a threat to their religious power.

They had enough. A meeting was called and a plan was hatched. Jesus had caused enough of a stir that it was time to neutralize the threat. Caiaphas gave an accidental prophecy by saying, with little sense of irony, that the death of Jesus would be the very best thing that could possibly happen (John 11:49–52). Killing Jesus would be the most sensible thing, religiously speaking, they could do. If Jesus were stopped, they could preserve what they and their forefathers worked so hard to build and maintain. Corruption crept in over generations, but only a few seemed to notice how far off they were from God’s intent of the Mosaic Law. Jesus pointed out their contradictions with cutting clarity, and the leaders were about to lose control. Lose everything.

An arrest with some jail time wouldn’t be enough. The people would surely argue for his release. (By the way, when the people had the chance to let Jesus out of custody, they didn’t. Instead they asked for the murderer Barabbas.) No, temporary punishment wasn’t enough. Jesus would have to be taken care of...permanently. There could be no risk of an uprising. John writes: “So, from that day on they plotted to take his life” (John 11:53).

You don’t have a resurrection without a death. You don’t have his

death without a crucifixion. You don't have a crucifixion without charges. You can't press charges without an arrest. You can't arrest someone without reason. You can't apprehend a person you can't find. Judas—one of his disciples, a man on the inside—would provide the path to his arrest. Everything else would fall into place, as long as the Roman Curate played along and actually ratified his death sentence. It took some political fancy footwork, but it wouldn't be too hard. Corruption is most functional in a deeply broken world.

A quick arrest, a coordinated effort to pull some barely effective charges together, some physical beatings and mind games to make him suffer, and finally his body hanging on a cross in a public place. His humiliation would have the effect of showing folks you don't mess with the status quo. Yes, it could be pulled off. Sure, it might get a tad ugly for a few days, but this will all pass over before too long. All pass over.

Oh wait, that's right...the Passover. They knew better than to arrest him during Passover, lest it rile up the already fickle crowd and cause an uproar. No, it would have to be under the cover of night. Judas would show them. He knew all the places Jesus went. He was paid handsomely for his trouble. For doing what seemed to be the right thing, really.

Oh the irony. The idea of plotting the death of the God-Man who overcame death...like trying to trap a hurricane in a shoebox. Nonetheless, an intricate plan was made. Now it was just a matter of time.

They have had enough. And now they had a plan.



Did you notice that everyone has some response to Jesus, whether it's believing or betraying? Is there any possibility of keeping him quiet, of putting him in his place, of ignoring him forever?

In Sunday's message, you were invited to see this from Jesus' perspective: Your creation is plotting to kill you. The people you have compassion for hate you enough to want you to die. This is like all the ants in your kitchen cupboard staging a hostile takeover. It's not going to work, but you play along because of the will of the Father. How does this make Jesus feel? What is the heart of the Savior through all this?

We've talked about the breaking point for parents and Pharisees, but what about Jesus? How do you think he manages to stay composed while being treated like a fugitive?

Prayer—Lord Jesus, you willingly gave yourself to your creation, and your creation didn't recognize you. Instead, they saw you as something to be removed. Yet you still love us. You still love me. Reveal in me the places where I reject your reality and chase you away rather than submit to you.

TUESDAY—APRIL 8

I'D LEAVE IF I COULD

JOHN 6:25-71

Have you ever seen something on a friend's social media page and thought "*well, that's about all I need to see of that*" and decided to unfollow them? Maybe it was a controversial post or a strong opinion that you didn't want to be associated with. Or, it was just too many pictures of cats in Christmas sweaters. Perhaps they said something offensive yet again, and, for whatever reason, you clicked them out of your circle, either muting their posts or unfollowing them altogether. We've all had to do this at some point and, if we're objective enough about it, something we posted has probably prompted someone else to unfollow us.

If you're not on social media (seriously, congratulations) you still know what it's like to be with friends, thinking it would be the last time you'd hang out with them. A conflict arose, a disagreement became too great, discomfort abounded. Sadly, it was time to move on. Something got under your skin and it was just too much to deal with.

Jesus was the kind of teacher that would get under people's skin because he was doing more than presenting information. He was shifting the balance and upending the system in ways that forced a personal decision and a new association. You're either with him or you're not. The healings and free lunches may have brought a crowd, but this was no gimmick on the part of the Messiah. The Word made flesh was bringing a new Word that both nourished and challenged people like never before. With Jesus, it's possible to be satisfied and conflicted at the same time. Genuine spiritual nourishment stirs up our structures of allegiance.

Spiritual nourishment is the very imagery that Jesus uses to describe himself in the earlier section of John, saying, "I am the bread of life"

(John 6:35). The more Jesus said about what this would mean for them, specifically as it related to their salvation, the more of a challenge it raised to the believers of the day. He said, “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry...” and, “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:40). Jesus taught in the Synagogue, saying “Whoever feeds on this bread”—referring to himself, his own flesh—“will live forever” (John 6:58b).

Excuse me? Did you hear what he just said? Jesus is bread that we...eat? The crowd began to murmur. The murmur grew to mild discussion... this is a hard teaching. Head nods, raised eyebrows. Who can accept it? The many who followed Jesus up to this point felt their disgust growing inside. Superfans of the Messiah—hero were at a crossroads, weighing their delight with his miracles against the implications of continuing on in this new, strange, frankly offensive way. Somehow, Jesus managed to antagonize their religious forefathers by saying what they had wasn't enough, while simultaneously irritating the people who thought he was a conquering hero, not a guy who kept talking about bread and blood, heaven and eternity. Disappointment. Severely unmet expectations. Fingers hovered over the unfollow button as he said “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them”(John 6:44). *Click.*

There was enough momentum away from Jesus that he asked the core group of twelve guys if they were gonna dip, too. “You do not want to leave, too, do you?” (John 6:67)— Jesus knew he just dropped the mic. It was a difficult teaching that had the natural consequence of pushing people to make a decision to keep following him or not. With people audibly rejecting Jesus, the tension in the tight knit group of disciples became tangible. *You guys, too?* It's a fair and rather vulnerable question. I can sense His heart at this moment. God invites but never forces us to himself.

Put yourself in this moment with me. We're part of the crowd, a couple of the superfans who have followed Jesus across lakes, eaten at miraculous buffets, and want even more—we're hungry physically and spiritually.

It doesn't matter where Jesus is going, because we know he'll make a "restaurant" pop up wherever the hungry crowds are. Next thing we know, Jesus is talking about spiritual food that doesn't spoil, being raised up on the last day, and how he came from the Father. It's not bread we need, it's him, the spiritually nourishing bread. You and I give knowing glances to each other—something is different about his teaching. He's a little more... pointed...challenging...and that's not what we signed up for. Suddenly, it's a mixed bag of emotions, where we feel a bit of confusion, disappointment, curiosity, and anger. You and I, superfans who were all in only moments ago, are reevaluating our position. It's when we see the crowds start to disperse that we wonder if we, too, need to be on our way. Maybe there's a new Messiah figure somewhere we can hitch our wagons to. The multiplied bread was delicious, the teaching brought comfort, but we can't commit to this. It's probably time to head out....

Did these thoughts cross the minds of the twelve as they watched people walk away in frustration? Their answer to Jesus' question about their leaving is starkly honest. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

Did you notice that they didn't try to make Jesus feel better, saying something like "*oh, don't worry about these fickle people, Rabbi. You're the best!*" Instead, they show all their cards to their Teacher: "Where else would we go?" In other words, they had considered the option of leaving but couldn't think of anywhere better to go. It's sort of like when you're on a long road trip, and the next exit only has a questionable restaurant with questionable healthcode adherence, and questionable menu items, but you're really hungry, and it's dark, and the next exit is 700 miles away. After your meal, you hop back on the road and add your review online:

★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆ *We had no other option. Bring your own hand sanitizer.*

His disciples may not give a feel good review of the situation, but you've got to admire their honesty. Most of all, there's no denying what they

say at that moment is still true today. There are challenges to following Jesus that leave us feeling confused and can bring disappointment, but who else are we going to follow? There is no other source of eternal life. Anyone else who claims to be the Holy One of God is a fake. Feeding on any other source of spirituality will only leave us sick and still hungry. Just because I'm offended doesn't mean Jesus is wrong. Do I expect to encounter Truth like this and keep living the same way and believing the same things? Am I looking for the source of life or someone to agree with me? Do I want to be entertained or spiritually nourished?

Where else would I go?



Do you ever “quiet quit” following Jesus—where you don't have an obvious John 6:66 response to the Messiah, but are confused, offended, and/or challenged by his teaching and simply don't engage?

Have you ever been bothered enough by the gospel that you questioned how to respond? If not, have you ever asked the Lord to open your eyes to see what the gospel really calls us to?

Is Jesus ever offended by our disappointment in him?

Prayer—Lord Jesus, you are the bread of life. Thank you for being bold enough to speak the Truth and compassionate enough to love us even when we reject you. Help me to be confident in your love for me as you challenge and shape my soul. Draw me closer to you, especially in times of confusion and disappointment.

WEDNESDAY—APRIL 9

GO TELL THAT FOX

LUKE 13:31-35

We Midwesterners sure don't like to make waves. "Ope", we say, whenever we pretty much do anything that could be considered disruptive or rude. I was raised by salt of the earth people who taught manners (*please, pass the gravy*), to clean up after yourself, to be conscientious with litter, to rake up the leaves in your yard before they blow into the neighbors yard, and to be polite to everyone. I once held the door to a gas station convenience store open for two minutes!

Any violation of our cultural code brings a call to immediately shrink back and remember our place. It isn't that we can never speak out, but that we need to apologize on the way into the complaint, on the way out of the complaint, or both. "I'm sorry, but this movie is just not good" or "Grandma, this sweater you knitted me is too small and really itchy. I wouldn't even use it as a dish towel...I'm sorry."

When the Pharisees say to Jesus, "Leave, Herod wants to kill you" (Luke 13:31), I wonder if they were counting on Jesus to be Midwestern nice. *Ope, my mistake, let me get my things and head out* is exactly what

Jesus didn't say. Instead, Jesus stands his ground (literally his, as he created and sustains it) and calls Herod a rather offensive nickname and doesn't even apologize for it! Jesus shows strength, resolution, and courage in the face of religious, political, and social pressure. Death threat from the powerful emperor? *Oh, I'm so scared. Tell him to buzz off—I have a job to do. In fact, go tell that fox I'm going to keep going today AND tomorrow AND the next.*

Man, I love this guy.

Jesus is kind, but he's not necessarily midwestern nice. I wonder if we project our own character onto him more than we realize? To be sure, Jesus doesn't stir things up out of boredom. He doesn't really draw attention to himself (though he always could have, and with justification). Instead, he presses on with the mission. He's motivated, focused, purposeful, and faithful to God. His belief in who he's been called to be and what he's been called to do is stronger than his fear of dying. When some Pharisees "do Him a favor" and let him know that Herod wants to kill him—and *Herod is quite capable, by the way*—Jesus doesn't return the favor by being nice and leaving. In fact, he does the exact opposite.

To paraphrase a line from a well-known C.S. Lewis novel, *Jesus isn't safe (or nice) but he is good*. In this story, he's strong and resolute. Not a wimp. His vulnerability is seen in raw moments where he teaches difficult lessons, causing people to walk away. His emotional awareness is seen when he weeps at the grave of Lazarus. In a few days, when he's on the cross, we'll see Jesus at the lowest point in human history. He won't die because he's nice and wants us to be nice. He dies because he's right and we're wrong, because it's our mess and only he can fix it.

Jesus will soon die—he knows this to be true. But it's not going to be by the hand of Herod, some temporary political leader who thinks he's bigger than Jesus. Besides, there's work to be done, and Jesus always finishes what he sets out to do. Even if it offends somebody.

After telling the Pharisees to shove off, and telling Herod "Old Fox" Antipas pretty much the same, Jesus turns to address the city of Jeru-

saalem—a people who have a history of killing prophets and punishing the messengers of God. Folks don't like it when outsiders tell them how to live, and at this point, Jesus is seen as a rude outsider by many. *"That's not how we do things around here, sir. If Herod wants you to stop, you'll mind your manners and stop. If a Pharisee tells you to leave, you'd better leave, mister."*

This didn't surprise Jesus one bit. He knows the history of Jerusalem. If you and I are familiar with midwestern nice, Jesus is familiar with Jerusalem jerk, where they'll throw rocks at anyone who claims the judgement of the Lord.

Jesus faces growing tension with his mission, which brings greater risk to his life each day. Instead of a hard heart and hurt feelings, Jesus aches for the people he's been sent to rescue. He says "I long to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing" (Matthew 23:37). This is compassion. This is gentle strength. A quiet storm. There's power here, and certainly a resoluteness, but also deep tenderness. Jesus doesn't feel the need to be right or to prove a point. He'll call Herod a fox, but he doesn't call down angels to destroy him. This is not all an act of revenge on creation—though we deserve it. Jesus is strong in his sense of mission and kind in his purpose behind it. It's you he's after. And he always has been.

We'll sing "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" in just a few days on Palm Sunday. As we have seen so far, the pressure on Jesus to knock it off is growing as he makes his way to the cross. Things are still a bit quiet overall, and it might be a good time to ponder the love that Jesus has for you. When is the last time you just let him love you—to be in a spot where you don't feel the need to keep the conversation going or to fill the silence? As Jesus looks out over us, he wants to gather us together. Did you notice the second half of verse 34, where Jesus says "you were not willing"? That's the question at this moment: Are you willing to be gathered by Jesus? To be loved by him?



Does Jesus have a good reason to become cynical? Why doesn't he?

What do you notice about the balance between the strength and vulnerability we see in Jesus? How does this relate to the Kingdom of God and our weakness compared to God's strength?

Do you sense the tension growing between the political, religious, and social realms of the story? Which one presents the greatest threat? Which one would bother you the most if you were Jesus?

Jesus said "you were not willing (to be gathered)." Why? Do we have this tendency now?

Prayer—Jesus, you are strong and you are kind. It is your strength in obedience that leads to the cross, and it is your kindness toward us that leads us to repentance. You love us in ways we often miss. Help me to take a moment now to let you love me, to gather me. I am willing. Amen.

THURSDAY—APRIL 10

WASTED WORDS

LUKE 18:31-34

I don't remember which life lesson my seven-year-old and I were talking about, but it ended the same way that many of these conversations end: "You'll understand when you're older, Cam." Sometimes it's in response to a question our kids ask: "Why did that lady do that?" "Why can't we just go on vacation every day of the year?"—"You'll understand when you're older." My parents said the same to me when I was growing up. You've heard and said the same yourself. A child asks a question that you attempt to answer, but the answer isn't satisfactory. To them, it doesn't make sense because they don't yet have context, and no amount of explaining will clarify. They'll have to file it away and hopefully remember it later.

It's the same reason your elementary-age child can't eat McNuggets for every meal, though we all know that's what they want. It's the elementary-school-age food pyramid: McNuggets, mac 'n' cheese, hot dogs, ranch dressing, Halloween candy. Parents say "Here, eat this broccoli." Kids ask, "why?" "You'll understand when you're older," the parents say. Tears abound. Perhaps a drizzle of Velveeta will help. Or ranch dressing.

There are other lessons we teach our kids, not in response to their questions, but out of a grown-up-level awareness of a situation that will come up later. Our older boys hear lessons from us like this all the time. Proverbs that sprout up about mastering your study habits or saving money or brushing your teeth. Yes, it's a pain now, but you'll understand and appreciate it when you're older.

Jesus does something like this in today's reading. His disciples followed him at first simply because he's a good teacher. Their faith and under-

standing grew rapidly, though they still had their blockheaded moments. Jesus is well connected with his chosen twelve. Yes, as Teacher and students—but they are friends, too, and their friendship is strong, predicated on what Jesus has shared with them (John 15:15). So, when it comes time to talk about a hard truth with his disciple friends, he minces no words. He doesn't want them to be surprised, because what happens next will be quite shocking. The kind of thing that would cause them to bolt if they weren't prepared. Of course, they end up running anyway, but nobody can say they weren't warned.

Then again, one could make the argument that the disciples didn't see the death of Jesus on the horizon, but it's not because they weren't told. It's because they didn't understand. Luke writes, "they did not know what he was talking about" (John 18:34). In fact, the meaning of what Jesus said to them was hidden from them. It was as if a seed were planted that wouldn't bloom until much later. Jesus was, in some sense, teaching in the future. He was injecting a Truth that would need time to settle in. He knew it would make sense later.

This raises a few questions. First off, why would Jesus say these things—and why would Luke write them down—if it wasn't going to make sense? Jesus is giving them something to look back on. This is similar to something Soren Kierkegaard says: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Hindsight is 20/20. As I say to our kids... "this will make sense when you're older".

Yet another question hangs in the air, at least for me. Does Jesus still do this today? Yes, we have the Holy Spirit who advocates, reminds us, and leads us into all truth (John 16:13). But are there things that the Lord is teaching us that don't make sense now but will later? If you think about it, all of scripture has this effect to some degree. Bible lessons from when we were kids take on even greater significance as we experience life and gain perspective. Bible passages that I have read and even memorized become profound in new ways as life keeps rolling along and the Spirit teaches. The problem isn't the revelation, it's the receiver.

Practically speaking, then...why would Jesus waste words? Surely, the Lord is not wasteful, and we can see in the gospels that he's readily aware of how limited his time is. The writers of scripture weren't known to find pointless filler for the pages—every word matters. John says that if everything Jesus said and did were written down, there'd be no library big enough (John 21:25). We're at no shortage of information and nothing is squandered. Which means Jesus is not wasting his words here. Or ever.

We're practical with our information and don't like to waste time. There are so many messages out there that we get overwhelmed. Our brains work hard to sort through media coming at us, and we are conditioned to ignore most of it. Consider the scripture. Have you ever read a Bible passage that just didn't click? Or, you get it, but there were no spiritual fireworks?

The first goal is to simply hear from Jesus. It's not necessarily understanding the text, it's exposure to it. Am I around Jesus enough to hear and recognize his voice? Understanding may come instantly, or it may take some pondering for a bit...or a month...or a lifetime. We never know what seeds are being planted. We just need to be faithful to God's Word and trust that the Holy Spirit will help us along as we need—when we need.

Take a moment and read today's passage again. Take note that Jesus speaks quite plainly. What's not to understand? Of course, we have the benefit of hindsight. We know how it ends. Let's pretend, though—as we've been trying to do throughout this study—that we don't know. Imagine expecting Jesus to live forever and be the Messiah King on earth. But here he is talking about how he'll be punished and die. He mentions the Old Testament prophecies (which are about to make sense in a new way). He says that he will rise again. *Say what?*

Even if you understood it at the moment, how hard would it be to believe? Of course, we don't have to believe something in order for it to be true. After all, no word from God is ever wasted (Isaiah 55:11).

It may not make sense now. *We'll understand when we're older.*



What's Jesus' main motivation in telling the disciples about what's going to happen? At what point in the story do these words become most helpful?

What does this short prophecy of Christ tell us about his trustworthiness, as well as the reliability of Scripture?

What might be going through Christ's mind as he describes to the disciples what's going to happen?

Prayer—Lord Jesus, you are so gracious as to reveal mysteries to us in clear ways. Yet, we are prone to misunderstanding, sometimes because the meaning is hidden, and sometimes because we don't take time to think through what you've said. Help us to see the story of your life, death, and resurrection with new eyes and new spiritual understanding, as only you can. Amen.

FRIDAY—APRIL 11

SERIOUSLY, DON'T MISS IT A PROPHETIC CHECKLIST

LUKE 18:31-34

Recall, if you will, a line from the foreword of this little devotional: we're taking on selective ignorance. As a personal discipline to get some fresh eyes, we're pretending we don't know how the story of Christ's death will end. Luke says that the disciples didn't know what Jesus was talking about—yet it was still said and preserved for our comfort, encouragement, and challenge. Like we've said, *we'll understand when we're older*. If we were one of the twelve disciples, what Jesus said would have flown right over our heads, too. At least it would mine (and with no resistance on account of the fact that I have no hair on my head).

Of course, no word from God ever returns void or empty. It gets sent out to people and accomplishes what God intends for it to accomplish. Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Bible incarnate, knows the entirety of the Old Testament because, well that's who and what he is. So, when the Rabbi says, "everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled" (Luke 18:31), he knows exactly what it means—even though the twelve didn't know, at least not at that moment.

Read the words of Psalm 23—"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing". Often heard at funerals, prayed by believers in especially difficult times, and quoted throughout culture, these are familiar words. I've said them myself a time or two (thousand). The Psalm right before this familiar one, Psalm 22, is about to become all too familiar to Jesus as it is a prophetic word about what will happen to him. Psalm 22:1 says "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words, lifted right

from the Psalm, are quoted by Jesus while he's on the cross (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). These Old Testament words of prophecy do more than bring a Psalm 23 comfort. Instead, it expresses words of terror and suffering—exactly what the Son of Man is feeling at that moment. Read the rest of Psalm 22 and note how it describes Christ's experience. "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. 'He trusts in the Lord,' they say, 'let the Lord rescue him'" (Psalm 22:7). Not only does Jesus quote the prophetic Psalm, the jeering crowd does too. And that's just one Old Testament prophecy fulfilled.

Delivered over to the Gentiles? *Check.*

Mock Him? *Check.*

Insult Him, spit on Him, flog Him? *Check, check, check.*

They will kill Him. *Check.*

I don't know if you've seen it before, but there are internet sites and apps that will take your lifestyle data and predict the exact time and date of your death. It's unpleasant. Death is not something we like to think about, as most of us (myself included) are quite happy with living and don't care to think about our last breath. I'm arrogant enough to live every day with the assumption that everything will keep going as it is.

Jesus does not have this luxury. He is God; he is human. Jesus will experience our entire human life, from birth to death, and everything in between. At Christmas, we celebrate his incarnation—God literally putting flesh/meat on. It's a sweet, touching story; as it should be. At Easter, we celebrate his resurrection—just as Jesus said would happen in Luke 18:33b. However, at this moment, we have to face the ugly truth that Jesus has a "death clock" of sorts—and that his death will not be peaceful at all. It will be marked by mockery, shame, extreme pain, and excruciating death. Worst of all, he carries your sin and mine on his shoulders and faces a new relational dynamic with his Father—feeling forsaken. Where are you? This will be a new experience for the second member of the Trinity. Jesus lives a sinless life and

dies as if a sinner. Of course the physical pain is excruciating, but the spiritual and relational pain will be overwhelming. Yet, it's by his own obedience and choice that he becomes sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21).

There's yet another topic, besides death, that we don't like to discuss: sin. Missing the mark. Separated from God, from each other, from ourselves, and from creation. Sin destroys. Sin is a wound. Sin kills. Jesus brings the only solution for our sin, the cross of Christ an instrument of suffering and salvation both. We see the full extent of his love in Jesus knowing what's going to happen and pressing on nonetheless.

We've talked about the external tensions building around Jesus—social, religious, and political. Note that there are internal tensions building, too. At a time where a friend's listening ear and understanding would have brought comfort, he instead plainly spells out the next steps to a bunch of confused young men who (probably) smell like old fish and have no clue what he's saying. He needs a friend and he's got well-meaning but utterly confused young men.

If you've ever had a surgery on the calendar, you know the apprehension it can cause. You think about the fear of the unknown, the concern over whether it will be successful, and the pain which will follow. This is often why people who need new knees get both done at the same time because, once they've experienced the first surgery and recovery, it's much harder to willingly go through it again and do the other. It's a burden that people can understand rationally but can fully relate to only through experience. Take that feeling, multiply by a few billion, and you'll get a sense of the kind of burden Jesus will carry for us. For you.

How much does Jesus love us? The tension is growing. He knows the checklist, understands the suffering to come, and presses on, by choice, on purpose. For us.



Read through the list of actions that Jesus gives in Luke 18:32-33. As gruesome as it is, take time to ponder each of these and put yourself in the moment. Think about what it would be like to be mocked, insulted, spit on, and flogged. Think about not only the physical pain but the emotional pain, as you're enduring this for the people who are hurting you.

Take it up a notch. Imagine, at that moment of deepest need, trying to recite Psalm 23 "The Lord is my shepherd" and switch over to Psalm 22 "Why have you forsaken me?" Think and feel through what it would be like to call out to God and get no response.

Do you get the sense that your view of Easter, and specifically how you view the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, is morphing as you ponder all this?

Prayer—Lord, I am prone to skip over pain and suffering, not wanting to be burdened. Yet you took on every burden for me. Thank you for your sacrifice and your willingness to face death, even death on a cross, for my sake and your glory. Help me to understand the full gift of salvation and what you've paid to bring freedom to me. Amen.

SATURDAY—APRIL 12

DONKEY SUPERSTAR

LUKE 19:28-35

There's an equine therapy ranch not too far from our house. If you've not heard of equine therapy, it's exactly what it sounds like: horses (equines) and mental health (therapy). You might be thinking it's like Mr. Ed got his counseling degree. Now there's an old reference—I might have to explain who Mr. Ed is to any reader under 40. It's not that the horses talk, but they are highly relational, and quite surprisingly, they make very good listeners. Children who have experienced major life trauma often find themselves without words in traditional therapy, unable to express to another person what they're feeling. For some reason—and this is well documented—equine therapy helps unlock these feelings in children and adults because they feel a safe connection to the horse. I would chalk myself up as a skeptic except that I saw it help our own kids through their trauma. It was a miraculous sign of God's grace.

Some people are natural horse lovers. Others like me, who grew up in the city and only knew horses from TV (Mr. Ed) and computer games (Oregon Trail), find them rather intimidating. Those big hoofs, long faces and bowling ball eyes are A LOT. When our family would visit the ranch, I found myself being very careful around the horses, as if they were about to give me a kick with their rear legs after detecting that I was just a city boy. I was far more familiar and comfortable with diesel exhaust and graffiti than I was with manure and the horses that produced it. As a native of Detroit, the only carriages I knew were horseless.

There was one animal at the therapy ranch that I was immediately drawn to—a donkey named Chester. Chester was chill. He'd just kinda hang out, like he was one of the boys, ready to shoot the breeze and

give an occasional outburst of brays, and then go back to just living his donkey life. I like Chester. It's almost like horses have something to prove. Not Chester. I dunno.

Interestingly enough (at least to me), this is how horses and donkeys come across throughout the Bible. Horses were used for war, donkeys for peace. If a king rode into town on a big buff horse, they were coming to fight. Kings riding donkeys were coming in peace, to hang out, just like Chester. Horses represent glory, grandeur, and power. Donkeys represent the practical, simple, and humble. The method of transportation for a king spoke volumes about their intention. It's not unlike comparing what people drive today. Our vehicles make statements about us, our lives, our values, and our socioeconomic status. I dare say that Jesus isn't driving a tank or a Humvee. He's driving an e-bike. It's not a perfect analogy, but hopefully you get the point.

It's time for Jesus to enter Jerusalem. He is a king, yes, but there's a choice to be made about how he will arrive. Of course, that decision was already made in Zechariah 9:9 which prophesied about this very moment—yet another example of an Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah. As the King of kings, Jesus has every right to ride in on a giant, gleaming stallion in resplendent glory. But no, our humble King chooses “a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Luke 19:28). Still righteous, still victorious, still a King. Unlike earthly kings, King Jesus has nothing to prove. The battle he is about to fight isn't with nations and military power. This is a battle of kingdoms, and the Kingdom of God takes the path of peace because it doesn't need to intimidate anybody.

Revelation 19:11–16 talks about Jesus riding on a white horse, a moment which is yet to come. By now we've seen more than enough examples of prophecy about Christ coming to pass in due time—just as his return is imminent. But we don't have time to talk about that just yet.

Back to preparations for Palm Sunday.

Let's get into the head of the colt for a minute. Random strangers walk up and start untying you from your owner's hitch. You, the colt, wonder what's going on. *Hey...this isn't Larry, the guy who normally takes*

me for walks and feeding. Who are these guys, and why do they look so nervous? Suddenly one of your owners speaks up: “Why are you untying the colt?” Good question, Larry, you think to yourself. Caught red-handed, ya thieves. Let’s see how they talk their way out of this one. “Um... the Lord needs it.” Ha! Who? The Lord?? Are they talking about Caesar? Judging from their outfits, I’m guessing they’re not with the emperor (donkeys are chill but remarkably perceptive and a tad judgemental).

Next thing you know, you’re being pulled along to who knows where. How in the world did they get away with that? Can you just take anything and claim the Lord needs it? (Children, pay attention—no, that’s not how it works). Oh, there he is. Wow. Such power and presence, yet peace. They’re putting their coats on me. Now the one they call Jesus is on my back. I guess I’m taking him somewhere....

What an honor. Lil’ beast, your role is to carry Jesus into Jerusalem. The Lord needs it—needs you, the colt.

This is about the greatest extent to which you and I will be used by the Lord, should we choose to avail ourselves to him. The crowd would cheer, but it wasn’t for the colt. They’re cheering for the Messiah. The King of kings, coming in peace, riding a donkey, not a horse.



Why does Jesus send two of his disciples on a mission to secure the colt? What’s the significance of their going out, being questioned, and loaded with an answer? Is there a deeper purpose and lesson to be learned here? What might it be?

It is interesting to note that it's the disciples who put Jesus on the colt, not something Jesus does himself. Is this mere logistics or are we being shown something profound about the character of the Lord and the role of humans in exalting him?

It's a donkey, it's a colt, it's a young foal... the writers of scripture are adamant about our knowing these details as they fulfill prophecy. Take time to look at Zechariah 9:9 in context. What do you see happening there? What else could be said about the significance of this moment?

Prayer—Lord Jesus, I recognize that you are King of kings, and we are right to give you the place of highest honor. How can I put you on the throne of my heart as I carry out this day? How can I be a method of transporting your glory into the places I will be? Open my eyes to your Lordship over all things, and remind me that I am, at best, a donkey who serves you. Amen.

SUNDAY—APRIL 13

SINGING STONES

LUKE 19:37-40

Today is Palm Sunday. The Church around the world and through all time celebrates God's power to save, a promise given through Old Testament prophecies that sat expectantly in the hearts of his people for generations. They knew the Messiah would bring healing and provision (Isaiah 61:1-2), that he would arrive at a unique time in a unique way (Isaiah 7:14), and that he would come in conjunction with Elijah who would turn hearts (Malachi 4:5-6). The Israelites had been waiting for hundreds of years for this moment and now, in this moment, God had sent the Redeemer—the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12)—just as we're entering Passover. There were many “wait, whaaaat!?” connections made in this moment of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Just like today, people understood at various levels. Central to the moment, however, is that the mood is celebrant, joyful, and alive. There's a vibe that can't be denied. People are legitimately happy and their worship is off-the-charts vibrant.

The Palm Sunday message at Central covers the big idea of Palm Sunday and all that it means for us as we follow Christ. Perhaps it would be most fitting to talk about how we will worship together as a church, especially as we work our way toward the cross and empty tomb.

Practically speaking, this is a huge week for Christians. Since Ash Wednesday, we've been in the season of Lent, the 40+ day countdown to Easter which makes space for reflection, repentance, and renewal. On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we will enter into the deepest moments of darkness as we journey with Jesus to the cross and tomb. Today, though, it is a day of celebrating with vibrant off-the-charts worship. “Hosanna! God saves! Bless his name!”

Remember the reading from today? The Pharisees tell Jesus to calm his disciples down. They're making too much noise and being all blasphem-y. The religious leaders do *not* like that these people are proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah, and they want it to stop. If the Pharisees asked the crowd to stop, they would have doubled down and potentially pushed back. The religious leaders implore Jesus, trying to tap into his softer side and ironically appealing to his authority. They call him Teacher. They use the word rebuke. It's an appeal to Christ's spiritual sensitivities. You can't flatter Jesus, though. I imagine his laughter when he says "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40).

Worship has to happen. Not because the Lord needs it, but because he is worthy. God is God. Truth is Truth. The Messiah has come. Salvation is here. When this reality gets deep into your soul, it naturally pours out. True worship, the kind that the Father seeks (John 4:23), is a result of our grasp of the Truth in our minds and hearts. The rocks may cry out, they may not. Rather than fixate on operatic limestone, we must realize that all of creation knows. The real question is this: *do we?*



Real talk. Do you feel like you've got a pretty good grasp on who Jesus is and what it means to follow him? Do you trust him as Savior, confess him as Lord, and worship him as King?

Real talk (again). We want Central to be a place where people are free to worship. For some of us, that's hands raised and lyrics sung loud. Others take a more stoic stance, meditating on Christ and pondering his glory. What matters most is the posture of our hearts. What it looks like outwardly isn't what counts—what counts is whether we are in total surrender to the Lord in worship (Romans 12:1-2). How are you growing as a congregational worshipper?

Take some time to study 1 Peter 2:4-5. Here we have living stones. Interesting, given what Jesus says about singing rocks in today's reading. It turns out that the rocks do cry out, eh?

They blessed God—the king who comes in the name of the Lord. How can you bless God today? Take some time to praise God for His grace, goodness, salvation, and hope.

Prayer—The heavens declare your glory, Lord. The skies proclaim the work of your hands. Creation cries out in worship to you. The rocks don't need to cry out, Lord. Help me worship you today, not just for what You have done but for who You are. Be glorified in every step I take as I journey with you to the cross. Amen.

MONDAY—APRIL 14

ANOINTING

JOHN 12:1-11

For a moment, we step backwards in the story. We are now in the village of Bethany, just before Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. It is six days before the Passover, an ancient Biblical tradition that celebrates God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt. Part of the ceremony includes slaughtering a spotless lamb in remembrance of the blood that had caused the angel of death to pass over their homes during the tenth plague (Exodus 12). Jesus is the spotless lamb, the stainless, perfect sacrificial offering which was to be selected five days before the Passover. Since Jesus enters Jerusalem the day after his dinner and anointing at Bethany, that means he shows up five days before Passover—which is exactly what brings thousands of people to Jerusalem to celebrate. See how Jesus doesn't abolish the Old Testament, but rather fulfills it? Amazing.

John, the author of this gospel account, wants to make sure we know when this is happening (six days before Passover). He also wants us to know where this is happening (Bethany) and why the location matters (it's the same place Jesus resurrected Lazarus). He also wants us to know that Chef Martha cooked up something good. You can tell because they're reclining, which is what you do after a stellar meal. Who's reclining? Jesus and Lazarus, just to name a few. I bet they have a lot to talk about, those two. They're about to have something in common.

It is in this setting that a very mysterious thing happens. Mary pours a bunch of perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair. It was a lavish move on her part because it was very expensive stuff. The good stuff. So good, in fact, that the disciple who also served as the financial manager, Judas, was none too pleased about the flagrant

waste of money. Not that he cared all that much about legitimate financial management. Judas skimmed more off the top than the pool guy at the aquatic center.

What's going on here? We have to remember that people's feet were filthy back then because their shoes were more like dirt-absorbing sandals that they wore across unpaved and mucky paths. Think of wearing a pair of slides to the beach and finding the relief of the foot washing station. You'll still get some sand in your car, but not nearly as much as you might've without the foot shower. The practice of foot washing (but with deeper meaning) will make an appearance later this week on Maundy Thursday. For now though, we recall that, socially speaking, this wasn't all that strange.

The strange part is what she's using and what it signifies. Mary is anointing Jesus, echoing the Old Testament ritual of anointing a priest for service in the Temple. Kings were given similar treatment that indicated their coronation and royal function. Jesus is both Priest and King, though in this case he's the Great High Priest and King of kings. The symbolism doesn't end there, though. Mary's anointing is an act of faith that sets Jesus apart as the Messiah, and—perhaps the most weighty aspect—prepares him for burial. The way that Mary carries out this anointing shows the faith that she had in the Messiahship of Christ. As Mary is lavish in pouring out something valuable, Jesus will be lavish in pouring himself out in sacrifice.

His anointing covers all the bases, from his priestly role to his royalty, right on down to the grave. This would be akin to a mortician measuring you now for your burial in a few days. It's morbid, but this is exactly what's happening at this moment. Here we have a valuable perfume given as an act of worship, a servant who is serving THE servant who will give his life. We cannot miss the significance of this moment. Jesus is about to go to Jerusalem as the new lamb, and just like the lamb, be sacrificed. It is an act of raw dignity and profound worship.

John reminds us that Lazarus is there—risen from the dead by the One who is preparing for his own death and resurrection. It is no accident

that the same geographical location serves as both a path down and a path up, a reminder that, when it comes to Jesus, death doesn't have the final word. It's a step, not a destination.

The evening before the Passover was usually a time of revelry and celebration, but the mood has shifted. Judas has stomped away in anger. Lazarus was having a good time until he heard that the Chief Priests plan on killing him off, too. As for Jesus, he is now one step closer to finishing his mission.

Can you smell the sweet aroma of lavish worship, sacrificial love, and total trust in God? It is both beautiful and terrifying. Still, Jesus presses on.

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Think about it from a budget perspective. Was Judas kind of right when it came to the level of wasted money we see here? Didn't he raise a good point about meeting the practical needs of others? Answer carefully but honestly, because it says much about what we truly value. Consider the answer Jesus gives to Judas's objection.

Lazarus was risen from the grave in John 11, but we know that, eventually, he died (again) and was not resurrected, at least not like the first time. Consider the witness of Lazarus to the resurrection power of Jesus. What do you think was going through his head while Jesus was anointed?

Do you have any smells that remind you of certain events in your life? When my daughter was born, I remember constantly washing my hands with the hospital soap, which had a very unique smell. Whenever I encounter that odor today, I remember her birth. Any chance of that in the anointing story?

Have you prayed about who you will invite to sit with you on Easter at Central?

Prayer—Jesus, we pray that we would have the same level of joy and freedom in the face of difficulty that you do. Thank you for staying committed to the way of the cross. We didn't know what you would face, but you did and you persevered. Help us to do the same as we die to self and live for you. Amen.

TUESDAY — APRIL 15

PREDICTION

JOHN 12:20-36

We're just a few days from Good Friday. Jesus is keenly aware of what's about to happen and is remarkably focused...so much so that when some Greek tourists stop by, their presence is all but lost in a sea of

other-worldly words from Jesus. Whether the Greek visitors ever saw him is irrelevant, for now we find ourselves getting deeper into the heart and mind of the Messiah as he ponders aloud the meaning of his coming death and resurrection. This passage of Scripture is like being able to see our Lord's prayer life from the inside. Look how he holds different aspects of his death in tension: seeds, servanthood, light, dark. He asks himself a question that tells us that he at least thinks about doubt (*what, do I ask the Father to get me out of this? No!*) God the Father conversationally responds out loud—not for the benefit of Jesus, but for ours. Jesus has the longview in mind: judgement, reaching all people, and calling us to be children of the light. I'm not sure how else to explain it. It's as if he wants us to know his stream of consciousness in this moment, and it's a lot to consider.

Jesus, the Son of God, is putting words to something we will never fully comprehend. For you and I, this is "just" a Tuesday. Some of us have a big weekend coming up—family meals, decked out baskets and those delicious peanut butter eggs, family photos on Sunday in the lobby, and lillies. We'll finish out the work week and have a fantastic weekend celebrating the resurrection. We'll invite a friend to sit with us and realize again the good news of the gospel—death is defeated, sin is sunk, and life everlasting starts now.

But still, for most of us, this is Tuesday. Nothing huge. Work. Kids at school. Maybe some formerly frozen leaves finally scooped up from the flower bed. For Jesus, this is his last Tuesday, and he knows it. He knows how he's going to die. He knows why. It would be fair to expect that there would be some pretty heavy thoughts running through his mind, yah?

His Tuesday is very different from ours. It's like some Typical Tuesday Greek visitors encountered Jesus on his last and worst Tuesday, and the incongruence is staggering. The visitors are looking for Jesus, the guy who raised Lazarus from the dead. They're in Jerusalem already, and the spectacle plus the possibility of a healing or a good word gave them the courage to look him up while they were in town on a Tuesday.

Walk into the room with Andrew and Philip and see Jesus. He's staring into the middle distance and clearly pondering something deep. Bear in mind that the Apostles don't comprehend what's coming, either. Jesus is alone with his thoughts (again). Loneliness abounds. You walk into the room with Andrew and Philip and watch for a moment. Jesus doesn't look up. He's focused on something only he can see. Andrew finally broke the tension, "*Um...Teacher? There are some Greek travelers who want to meet you...are you ok?*"

After a moment, the Teacher speaks up. "The hour has come..." (John 12:23). As he begins, the three of you find a seat to be present, listening closely. There's something different about this moment. He's not nervous, but he's also not jovial. He's focused. He's resolute. He speaks his thoughts.

Read John 12:20-36 again. Seriously. I know you might not, but I hope you will. What I have to say will never give justice to this conversation, which is like a cave full of gems that all deserve to be pondered for a long time. Take a breath, ask the Spirit to help you understand, and enter the story again. See yourself in the scene. As you slowly read, see what stands out. Pause the conversation when something grabs your attention. Stay there and ask questions of the Holy Spirit. Take whatever idea God "underlines" and keep it as a nugget in your mind throughout the day today.

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What stood out to you in John 12:20-26? If nothing popped off the page, take a moment to read it again, asking the Holy Spirit to help you see an insight that he wants to keep on your mind. It may be a new revelation or an all-too-familiar part of the story that takes on a new meaning. Ponder.

Let's say you were an out of town traveler. You've heard the miracle stories and want to meet Jesus. If you gained access, what would you say?

Of course, the second question—gaining access to Jesus—is something you have now. He's wherever you are and ready to converse. So... have the conversation about this scene. Pray through it, telling Jesus what you see. Ask him to teach you something about His character. Ask him to search your heart.

Prayer—Lord, you endured so much for my behalf. You knew the agony of the cross was only a few days away, which is overwhelming to contemplate. At the same time, you must feel a sense of isolation in this moment of the story. Thank you for being confident enough in God to proceed anyway. Give me the same courage to faithfully follow You today. Amen.

WEDNESDAY—APRIL 16

BETRAYAL

JOHN 13:18-30

You'll recall the first thing we talked about with Plot/Palms/Passion was the plot to kill Jesus. His crucifixion was not stumbled into by pure happenstance; it was an orchestrated event that began with a reactive plot, a dirty scheme to apprehend him while he was away from the crowds, cooperation with the Roman government, shaky and unsubstantiated charges, the botched release of a criminal, and the crucifixion of two thieves on each side of the innocent One.

Every step in the plan was crucial. According to the timeline, the next step was up to their hired hand, a guy on the inside who would bring the guards to the secret place where Jesus prayed. It was a good use of 30 pieces of silver, just enough to get Judas to help them, but not enough that it broke the bank. The man was upset about how wasteful the anointing was, and was more than eager to get the payoff. Money made his world go 'round.

With this deal in place, everybody wins. Judas gets his 30 bucks, Jesus will be out of the way, his followers scatter, and nobody gets hurt. Mostly nobody.

The most difficult aspect to comprehend about this moment in the final hours of Jesus' time is the fact that he knows Judas will betray him. He gives a clear signal to everyone there that only made sense in hindsight. "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am" (John 13:19). Knowing what we know now, Jesus is right. This is just another piece of the puzzle that proves who he is.

I've sometimes wondered how it was that Jesus didn't walk around the earth super mad at people. He knows our hearts and our faults, he

sees our face(s) and knows when we're lying to him and mistreating others. How does he maintain such patience and composure as to not just put everyone in their place? If you knew what was on everyone's mind, including what they thought about you, and you knew what they were going to do to you—like, say, *turn you in to be murdered*, for example— wouldn't you be just a tad cynical? Maybe it's just me, but that would probably ruin my view of humanity for a very long time.

Not Jesus, though. He accepts betrayal. Did you read that? He accepts betrayal. He knows what we're capable of, realizes our deep dysfunction, knows what we did and how it broke part of the world, and yet...he still loves us. Oh, he's going to call it out, but don't doubt for one second that he is motivated by love and compassion, grace and truth, and a peculiar servanthood and Lordship. *Betrayal?* He expects no less from messed up humans who say one thing and do another, who lie to others, themselves, and God, who treat others like garbage and complain when they do it to us. We're a mess. A beloved mess.

If you see yourself as John, the disciple Jesus loved, that's a healthy view of his love for you. If you see yourself as Peter, the bold and brash leader, that's a healthy view of how Jesus entrusts you with certain responsibility and expects you to push forward. If you see yourself as Thomas, full of doubt yet blessed by an even stronger faith in the end, that's an honest and realistic take on how you roll. *But...*

If you see yourself as Judas, you may be closer to real than you care to admit. I see myself in Judas. Oh, I've never accepted a bribe and turned Jesus to the authorities. But I sure have turned my back on him. I have sold his presence for my indulgence. I have sold his values for my selfishness. I have sold his teaching for my "better" strategy.

Can you relate? This isn't about seeing yourself as a bad person. You're no worse (or better) than the rest of us. We all need grace. We're all sinners. We're all loved. We can be forgiven. Nah, I'm not trying to make you feel bad about yourself. In fact, this isn't even about you. It's about Jesus and the measure of his grace. He's full of grace—enough to put up with us. He's full of truth—the kind that stands up through

everything else. You don't have to be good to get grace, and you don't have to reason your way to right and wrong. It's there. He's there. Ready to be found, no matter what you've done. This man Jesus looks his betrayer in the eye.



It says that Satan entered Judas as soon as he took the bread. John wants us to know there are spiritual powers of darkness at work here. Yet Judas took the bread, as if taking the role on by his choice. How does this act as a warning for the hearts of those who follow Christ?

Judas made the choice to walk away (13:30). Do you think this was a recent decision or something he thought about for a long time? What does it tell us about perseverance and following Jesus for the long haul?

When Jesus says he's "deeply troubled", what does this tell us about his humanity and divinity?

Add the Maundy Thursday service to your calendar—April 17, at 6:30PM

Prayer—Lord Jesus, it's only by your grace and not my goodness that we can be united to the Father through you. I ask you to reveal your heart to me as I invite you to reveal my heart, the beautiful and ugly, and help me to stay close to you as the pressure builds while we journey to the cross. Amen.

MAUNDY THURSDAY—APRIL 17

A NEW COMMANDMENT

JOHN 13:1-17, 31:B-35

We devote a lot of time and energy to self-discovery. Personality profiles, temperament inventories, StrengthsFinder and WeaknessFinder, which is a thing I just made up but would probably reveal my weakness as really good french fries. I like to know myself and how I operate, and learning the same about others helps me appreciate the variety that God has wired into y'all. I'm glad that there are people who are naturally good at things I'm not good at. A different perspective stretches my own framework and reminds me that the complexity of life requires a complexity of understanding that one person could never bring on their own. Indeed, the more we understand about each other, the less frustrating our differences become. We need the reminder that we're not all the same. Keeping this in mind fuels grace for each other.

John takes time at the beginning of chapter 13 to lay out something of a personality profile slash StrengthsFinder slash mission and value statement about Jesus. Jesus knows...

1. **Who he is...**He's the son of God who entered the context of human history for a certain mission (Galatians 4:4). Just as the mission of his incarnation had a beginning and a middle, it will soon have an end of sorts. The resurrection gets the final word.
2. **How he loves...**He loved his own who were in the world. Jesus always loved them, and he will love them to the end. He loves unconditionally, wholeheartedly, and humbly. Jesus has every right to be on a power trip, but he's not. His meekness is staggering.

3. *Who's in charge...* The suffering will come. It will be real suffering by a human being, not a symbolic or tepid experience. Satan is stirring the hearts of certain people in taking Jesus down. Instead of feeling stuck under the thumb of evil, Jesus is firm in his authority. The power structure only seems upside down. This is temporary. He knows this.
4. *What's next...* John uses language of closure: Jesus came from the Father and will go back to the Father, but not until he teaches his students a last lesson.

As we've discussed already, foot washing was an ordinary event in Jesus' day. Typically you'd walk into a house after a long dusty trip and find a servant at the door, ready to clean you heel to toe. It was an act of hospitality. Clean feet in the house were as polite then as it is now. Today we ask "should I take my shoes off?" with the same idea in mind. If I come over to your house, you won't need to wash my feet. I've been on the pavement with good shoes. Back then, it was a sandal-clad dusty journey on foot.

Let's push these two concepts together. Here's some math:

Jesus knows who he is, how he loves, who's in charge, and what's next *PLUS* foot washing as an at-the-door hospitality service provided by a servant/slave *EQUALS*...

- The King doing humble servant work.
- A previously unknown generosity of salvation and servanthood.
- Exaltation by humiliation.
- The biggest step down imaginable.
- The highest doing the lowest for people who don't get it.

Jesus knows he's got a target on his back. Time is tight. Yet, here he goes again, taking the time to teach us by doing—and tells us to do the same for each other.

Sometimes we want to get to know ourselves so that we can master our lives and destiny. Again, nothing wrong with knowing ourselves.

Take a moment to notice, however, that Jesus, in knowing who he is, doesn't use that to his advantage. It's to our advantage.

It doesn't matter who I am or what I can do. I must take the role of servant. Jesus took the role of the lowly servant by washing the feet of his disciples. I have no business in taking any higher level than assistant foot-washer.

This is what Maundy Thursday is about. Jesus has given himself for us—taking the nature of a servant. He loves us and wants us to do the same. He calls it a new command in John 13:34. In Latin, *Novum Mandatum*—a new mandate—is where we end up getting the phrase Maundy Thursday. We are mandated by Jesus to love one another as he has loved us.

Of all the things Jesus could be doing in the crucial moments before everything goes dark, he wraps a towel around his waist made of material he created and gets down on his knees to wash the feet of men who will run away—including the betrayer. He tells me to take the same approach with everyone else. It's a mandate. It is not a suggestion. Jesus gives us a command and teaches by example.

If this is the lesson that the Master delivers to them and us at such a late hour, it must be rather important.



Maundy Thursday is the new command to love one another as Jesus loves us. Of course, love isn't a new idea. So...what's new about this?

Of course it's Peter, the outspoken disciple, who speaks his mind and makes it awkward. What do we learn from that interchange? By the way, one of my favorite things about Peter is that you never wonder what he's thinking. Their conversation was important enough for John to include it in the gospel. Why?

Jesus asks a powerful question: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (John 13:12). The disciples would gain understanding later on. What do we know now that they didn't?

Add a Good Friday service to your calendar—April 18 at 12PM, 5PM, or 7PM.

Prayer— Lord Jesus, you are a servant to all. You love with both words and action. You've given us a new commandment to love one another. Help me to see your love for me and others as I seek to carry your love to a broken world. Thank you for teaching us and loving us. Thank you for taking the role of a servant. Open my eyes to your love as I travel with you in these next few difficult days.

FRIDAY — APRIL 18

BAD/GOOD FRIDAY

JOHN 18:1-19:37

You've been given a big section of scripture to read today. So much can be said about Good Friday.

Good Friday is good because evil is conquered, powers are overthrown, sin is crushed, death is dead.

Good Friday is bad because of the experience of Jesus. The all-powerful One took the least powerful path to the tomb.

The best thing you can do is slowly and prayerfully read John 18:1-19:37. Remember how we talked about the story shaping us?

Let this story shape you.

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Jesus told Pilate that his Kingdom is not of this world. How does this challenge your way of life? How does this push against the values of the world, and how do we live in light of this truth?

Why did Peter deny Christ? What was he trying to avoid? What was he trying to accomplish? How do you respond when the opportunity to deny Christ arises?

Jesus models the deepest example of self-denial the world has ever seen. How are we to live this out in our lives? The season of Lent gives us an opportunity for self-denial as a spiritual discipline. Have you said “no” to anything in order to take on the call of Christ?

Good Friday is a different kind of day. It begins a time of mourning and deep self-reflection as we take on the suffering of Christ in our own lives, not to earn salvation but to journey with Him. What can you do this weekend, starting now, that will make silent space for you to mourn the death of Christ while preparing for the great celebration of Easter?

Prayer—Lord Jesus, you have given everything. You finished the mission. We know your resurrection is only days away, but to the early Christians, this was a time of deep sorrow and confusion. We experience sorrow and confusion in our lives, but the victory you bring is more than enough to carry us through. Just as you trusted the Father, so help us to do the same. Help us ponder the mystery of your death, and put to death our own sinful nature. Cleanse our hearts. Help us to rest in the silence with you. Amen.

SATURDAY—APRIL 19

HOLY & AWKWARD SILENCE

JOHN 19:38-42 + ROMANS 6:3-11

Planning a funeral raises pressing questions. Times of mourning are punctuated by practical decisions about obituaries, scheduling a viewing and planning a memorial service, and dealing with legal paperwork as we manage the personal belongings of the deceased. Throughout the stages of sadness and loss, we walk alongside each other and remember the words of Jesus himself, who said “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Through tears and an array of emotions, we sort through the loss in our own hearts as we sort through the pressing details of honoring the person who was once here and is now gone.

With his public followers scattered and unable to provide for such, an otherwise unknown private follower rises up to take care of the most basic yet necessary detail following death: what do we do with the body of Jesus?

Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus, though he did his best to make sure the Jewish leaders didn't know about his secret ambition, lest they have him punished, too. Even after Jesus died, being identified as one of his followers brought a certain amount of risk. Yet, the crucified body of Christ needed some degree of dignity in these post-mortem days. Joseph's fear of being found out wasn't enough to stop him from asking Pilate for the body, so he simply...asked for it. Had Joseph of Arimathea left it alone and not carried out the traditional Jewish burial customs with Nicodemus (the same guy who also kept his growing faith in Christ on the down-low—see John 3:1-21), we wouldn't even know his name.

If we're honest, we may find ourselves to be more like Joseph than we care to admit. On one hand, John's gospel describes him as a disciple—someone who intentionally takes up the practices of the (now) crucified Jesus, which changes everything about our lives. Yet, on the other hand, Joseph wants to keep it quiet and do a good deed without being found out. John let the cat out of the bag as he tells the story about the mixed faith of Joseph: a vital character of the crucifixion story who would be otherwise unknown.

Most of us are regular folks whose names will be forgotten. Not Nicodemus, and not Joseph of Armathea. These fellas are remembered for wrapping the body of Jesus, along with 75 pounds of spices in strips of linen, and placing him in somebody else's (brand new) tomb. It wasn't a funeral, at least not yet, since it was the Jewish day of Preparation. Jesus was basically stored in a borrowed tomb—a morgue, really—until they could finish the task.

The fact that Joseph and Nicodemus were so private about their faith has always sat funny with me. Partly because their secret is out—they're now quite public in the gospels, which have been read by millions of people—and partly because I can personally identify with the tendency to keep my faith quiet in risky situations. In other words, I look down on them for their lack of courage while at the same time acknowledging my own lack of courage. I point to them with one finger while three other fingers point back at me.

These are the kind of things people do when they want to live separate faith lives, who want to follow Jesus and live it out when it's convenient.

Discipleship knows nothing of convenience.

And...these are the kind of things people do when they expect a dead person to stay dead. His funeral is planned for tomorrow. Of course, those plans are about to abruptly change!

The early church refers to today as Holy Saturday— a day of decomposition, of mourning, and of silence. Of course, we know the glorious and majestic end of the story, which picks up tomorrow in a rather

surprising way. Until then, we wait...we ponder the total death of Jesus. He isn't passed out or taking a long nap. He's dead. His mission on earth has been fulfilled, a testimony of his power as the Messiah who gave everything for you and me.

Jesus was faithful. Will I be found faithful to him, no matter the circumstances? Will I be like the disciples who run away in fear, or at least muster enough courage to boldly celebrate Him, even in his death? The only way to live the resurrected life is to die to ourselves (Galatians 2:20), counting ourselves fully dead to sin and then alive in Christ. Tomorrow is Resurrection Sunday. The crucified One will rise again! For now, we wait and ponder. Have I died to myself? Am I risen with Christ? Can I celebrate God's story and see my story of death and resurrection within it? Am I dead to self? That's the question we reflect on during Holy Saturday. Thank God it doesn't end there... we are risen with Christ (Colossians 3:1). But for now, it's death with Jesus. This is the vital step we must take before we are to be risen with him.

After all, you can't have a resurrection without a death.

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Discipleship knows nothing of convenience. Following Jesus means trusting him as much as he trusts God the Father. God isn't looking to make it easy. Instead, he wants to make us like His son (Romans 8:29). Not to make it too obvious, but remember that the Son is currently in the grave. On this Holy Saturday, as all creation waits in darkness, what is it that needs to be laid down and left behind that limits your Christlikeness? Is it a recurring sin? A heart attitude? Something that needs to be handed over to the Lord? Today's the day to do so, for tomorrow we rise again.

On this Holy Saturday, everything is on hold until Easter Sunday. Visualize what it would look like to be more like Jesus tomorrow, and take the pause of today to reflect. Ask God to do some rearranging of your heart that aligns you with the victory we're about to celebrate.

Without a resurrection, we have only the death of a good teacher. Jesus is the Messiah, and he's about to demonstrate his Lordship and power in the most dramatic way. Without death and resurrection, sin still has power, eternity is without hope, and darkness wins. But that's the case tomorrow! Take a moment to praise God for the victory we have in Christ and get ready. Until then, we wait...

Prayer—Jesus, you were crucified, you died, and you were buried. Help us to reflect on your self-sacrificial death and accept the challenge to die to self. May your Spirit give us pause to ponder and power to rise with you. Thank you for forgiving us and setting us free. Grant us clean hands and a pure heart. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

EASTER

AT CENTRAL

April 20 • 9AM + 10:45AM

Invite someone to come sit with you,
and join you for an Easter pancake breakfast
after services in the Multi-Purpose Room.



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