

# God's Good Story

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Luke 19:28-40

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

*Journalists tell us bad news attracts more readers than good news.*

People say they prefer good news to bad news. Yet, the curious thing is that bad news sells. In the grocery store check-out line, I scan the headlines of supermarket tabloids and easy-reading magazines. Do you really think people would buy these magazines and tabloids if the headlines read: Harrison Ford Reveals His Secrets on Home Repair or Britney Spears Spends an Enjoyable Evening Reading Robert Frost Poems? I seriously doubt it. We want the dirt on other people. It makes us feel better about ourselves. Journalists tell us bad news attracts more readers than good news.

God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption is a good news/bad news story. The bad news is that people have fallen and can't get up. In theological terms, we call it "the fall." We fall out of relationship with God through something called sin and we need to be rescued. The good news of God's Big Story is that God will stop at nothing to redeem people.

The four eyewitness accounts of Jesus in the Bible are called "gospels." Gospel is an old English word meaning "good story." The gospel of Jesus Christ is a good story about how God redeems people.

We begin Holy Week today in the church; what we sometimes

call Passion Week. "Passion" originates from the Latin *pascha* meaning suffering. Our focus this week will be the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

While the events of Jesus' life move along at a steady clip in the gospels, the last week in Jesus' life slows down to a sequence of single frames. It's as if the last events in Jesus' life play out in slow motion.

These four gospels serve as a type of biography on the life of Jesus. Biographies tell the story of people's lives. The focus of biographies is clearly on the lives of people, not their deaths. Not so in the gospels! One-fourth of the gospels concern themselves with the last week in Jesus' life. A German theologian, Martin Kahler, said the gospels are essentially passion narratives with long introductions.

Biblical scholars are uncertain whether the events of Palm Sunday to Easter can be compressed into a single week. Palm Sunday, however, represents a decisive turning point in Jesus' ministry. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, events are set in motion which lead inexorably to his death.

Jesus' Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem occurs during the season of Passover. Of the three Jewish festivals celebrated in Jesus' day, Passover was the granddaddy of them all. Passover commemorates God's deliverance of His people from slavery. Faithful Jews were

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expected once during their lifetimes to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Jesus and his disciples join the throngs of worshippers to observe the Passover. Jesus tells his disciples in preparation for their entry into Jerusalem, “Go into the village ahead of you and as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt [or donkey] that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you why you are untying it, just say ‘The Lord needs it’” (19:30-31). Luke doesn’t say whether the colt will be there by prior arrangement or divine appointment.

The disciples do as instructed. Sure enough, when they’re asked why they are taking the colt, they supply the password, and the story continues on course.

Matthew regards this seemingly insignificant reference to a donkey as fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah: “Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt the foal of a donkey” (Matthew 21:5).

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is not your typical ticker tape parade. Whenever a victorious Roman army returned from battle, the general would lead the procession riding his great white steed. The conquering soldiers would follow carrying the spoils of war. Bringing up the rear were the prisoners in chains, as if to say this is what happens to people who defy the Roman Emperor.

Jesus doesn’t ride a war horse, he rides a donkey. Donkeys were

not used in battle. They were used for domestic, peaceful purposes. Jesus rides a donkey, not a war horse. He comes for peace, not war.

The crowd breaks off palm branches and spreads garments along the parade route. They shout Hoshi-a-na, meaning “Save us, we pray” and “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” (19:38). These words from Psalm 118 were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem.

As Jesus and his disciples crest the Mount of Olives, overlooking the holy city, feelings of patriotism swell in the hearts of Jesus’ disciples (19:37). Zechariah identified the Mount of Olives as the place of Messianic visitation (14:4). Jesus’ disciples must be thinking that it’s time for Jesus to restore the kingdom to Israel.

The indignant Pharisees order Jesus to silence his over-zealous disciples (19:39). “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” Jesus’ comeback is brilliant! “I tell you, if these [disciples of mine] were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

Go ahead, Jesus, seize the day! Carpe Diem! It seems the perfect time for Jesus to claim his rightful throne. But as the holy city comes into view, Jesus is overcome with emotion, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! If only you had known the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (19:41).

The irony is unmistakable; the crowds cheer as Jesus weeps. As our story unfolds, we realize why Jesus weeps over the city. For a few fleeting moments, Jesus receives his due as the rightful king of Jeru-

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saalem. But several days later, everything will come crashing down around Jesus.

I'm ambivalent about celebrating Palm Sunday. Don't get me wrong. The music and the palm branches are something special. But this impromptu parade is so short-lived. Palm Sunday begins with such promise. "Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." By the end of the week, the crowds utter the words our lips tremble to name, "Crucify him."

Maybe it's not all that surprising the crowd turns on Jesus. After all, crowds are fickle. Ask our fabled athletes. One day the adoring public worships the ground they walk on. Yet, watch what happens when our stars hit a prolonged slump. The "boo birds" will gather like vultures to register disapproval.

Crowds are fickle. Ask kids in school. One moment someone is your best friend. The next moment a friend can turn on you faster than a New York minute.

The British reformer, Oliver Cromwell, once said to a friend, "Do not trust the cheering, for those persons shout as much if you and I were going to be hanged?" Do I hear an "Amen," Jesus?

We might expect the crowd to bail on Jesus, but how do you explain the wholesale mutiny of his friends? There is a poignant one-liner in Mark's gospel, "They all deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50). Nice friends, huh?

Never mind the betrayal of that dirty rat Judas, what about the

desertion of Jesus' closest friends, Peter, James and John? None of them sticks up for Jesus. No one defends Jesus at his trial. Isaiah prophecies with penetrating insight, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to go our own way (53:7).

Jesus knew his disciples would go AWOL. "All of you will desert me," he said (Mark 14:27). Peter wouldn't hear of it. "I will never desert you."

"I tell you, Peter," Jesus said, "before the rooster sounds reveille tomorrow, you will deny me three times." Sure enough, the rooster crows and Peter weeps.

We're sorry, Lord, that we're such fickle followers. One moment we're Jesus' best friends. The next moment, we deny even knowing him.

One of the reasons I believe the Bible is on account of the candid way it portrays Jesus' followers. They're not model citizens; they are fickle followers. Do you see yourself in the gospel? I do!

*Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing* is a beloved 18th century hymn. Some years ago, I was asked what the words "Here I raise my Ebenezer" meant. Even though I had sung this hymn for years, I didn't know the meaning of raising an Ebenezer. My only association with Ebenezer was Ebenezer Scrooge.

In the Old Testament book of Samuel, when God delivers His people from their enemies, Samuel places a stone as a memorial and calls it Ebenezer. The Hebrew word Ebenezer means "The Lord helped

***“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it....”***

us.” Whenever people saw the stone, it would serve to remind them, “The Lord helped us.”

The last verse of the hymn describes us well. “Let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee: Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” Robert Robinson was only 22 when he penned these words, but they show extraordinary insight into the human predicament. “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love.”

I’m rather slow to ride the internet wave. When I learned, recently, an NBA player was sending tweets to his fans during halftime of his game, I had to plead ignorance. I had never heard of twitter, except in relationship to birds. Twitter, as I’ve come to find out, is a new micro-blogging feature that allows you to send and receive minute-by-minute updates on people. It’s popular with celebrities and athletes, but is now gaining popularity with the younger crowd.

Let’s suppose we keep a minute-by-minute Twitter of our spiritual life. Would anyone be willing to make public what we thought about this week or how we spent our money and allocated our time? I don’t think so! “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.”

I invite you to do two things during Holy Communion today. First, admit to Jesus that you are prone to wander. We’re sorry, Lord, that we’re such fickle followers. Jesus offers you full

pardon at this table. If Jesus can pardon Peter, he can pardon anybody.

Second, ask Jesus for help. Let the last line of this hymn be our prayer: “Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for thy courts above.”

***“Here’s my heart,  
O take and seal it....”***

