

Lenten Sermon Series #5
“What Led to the Cross?—Jesus of Nazareth”
April 14th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday

Based on Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Mark 11:1-19

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! ² Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³ This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! ²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. ²⁷ The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. ²⁹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. [NRSV]

Mark 11:1-19

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the

distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.

¹⁵ Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” ¹⁸ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Once again, startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own, and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Sermon Series: What Led to the Cross?

Five and a half weeks have *already* passed since we began the season of Lent, and we have now made it to Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. The forty days we spend each year journeying with Jesus and his closest friends toward Jerusalem and the cross always seem to pass so quickly. It reminds me every year that forty days seems like such a relatively small amount of time for us to spend on such an important part of Jesus’ life and ministry. But, thankfully, we’re not done just yet—we still have the whole Holy Week drama ahead of us ... Maundy Thursday is coming, then Good Friday, and only then, finally, Easter next Sunday.

And, it’s the specifics of this Holy Week drama that we have been exploring in this year’s sermon series, as we have focused on a few of the main events and characters involved in the final days of Jesus’ own journey toward the cross. During my first sermon in this series, from way back in early March, I explained that my goal was to provide context and background as to who and what actually led Jesus to the cross, and I asked everyone to ponder the following questions: Why was Jesus arrested? Why was Jesus put on trial? And, why was Jesus condemned to die on the cross?

The Evidence Against Jesus—Four Incidents

So far, we have investigated all the circumstances involved with these questions—we have explored Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution, but I’ve waited until today—Palm

Sunday—to reveal the exact evidence against Jesus of Nazareth, which I believe will provide clarity and help us better understand exactly what Jesus did that seemed so terribly wrong? Because in the eyes and in the minds of both the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities, the evidence against Jesus is compelling and damaging, and all of it made his execution inevitable. And, believe it or not, there was no single incident that doomed Jesus to his fate—in fact, there were four—all happening consecutively from Palm Sunday until two days before the Passover meal on what we call Maundy Thursday.

Piece of Evidence #1: Entry Into Jerusalem

The first piece of evidence against Jesus was that he aroused his opposition by the manner of his entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the final week of his ministry—on this exact day that we call *Palm Sunday*, which we have been celebrating with palm branches, songs, and prayers. But, it was so much more than cloaks and palm branches! He entered the holy city that day mounted on a donkey, amid shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” (Mark 11:1-10). Entering the city in this way was a deliberate recalling of King Solomon, who one thousand years earlier rode the royal mule as part of his declaration of kingship (1 Kings 1:32-40). Such an entry also answered the ancient prophecy from Zechariah of the anticipated humble king (Zechariah 9:9). Not only did Jesus’ actions recall hopes of a coming son of King David, but also the crowd’s response reflected the same popular interpretation of it. Their Hosannas, as an allusion to Psalm 118, were a pronouncement that this Jesus of Nazareth, who comes to the temple “in the name of the Lord,” is none other than the seed of David, the one destined to be Israel’s king and ruler (see Psalm 118:19-27). In addition, the allusions to King Solomon and the messianic king resonated with a larger Jewish expectation of the triumphal arrival of a ruler or military hero. However, Jesus did ride a donkey rather than a warhorse, which signifies something other than a military conqueror. Even still, simple pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem would have typically approached on foot, so if Jesus rode into Jerusalem on anything other than his own two feet, then he was calling attention to himself as something other than a common pilgrim. So such a Jerusalem entry event suggested, in unmistakable terms, that Israel’s king was Jesus, not Caesar. Thus, from the very moment of his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was set on a collision course with the Roman authorities.

Piece of Evidence #2: “Temple-Tantrum”

The second piece of evidence against Jesus was his actions in the temple area—what I like to call his “Temple-tantrum” (which we also covered in the separate Lenten

Sunday School Series)—turning over tables and screaming at people. By his actions, Jesus was symbolizing the destruction of the temple and protesting certain corrupt practices. His actions that day not only disrupted trade and traffic, it also challenged the ruling priests with some very troubling words (Mark 11:15-18). Jesus proclaimed to them all, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” (v.17) Now, I believe Jesus chose his words very carefully that day—quoting the prophet Isaiah describing King Solomon’s original purpose for the temple—that it would be a place where all God’s people would be welcome to worship and pray (Isaiah 56:7). But, Jesus was implying that the temple authorities of his day and time had failed to live up to their true calling. The temple had not become a place of prayer for all the nations, but rather, to Jesus—to God in the flesh—it had become a “den of robbers.” The Jewish leaders were deeply offended by Jesus’ critical and offensive words, and this, as they say, was “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Thus, because of his “temple-tantrum,” Jesus was set on a collision course with the Jewish religious leaders, too.

Piece of Evidence #3: Parable of the Vineyard

The third piece of evidence against Jesus, which I did not read aloud, was his telling of the parable of the vineyard as an indirect answer to the question asked of him by the Jewish leaders, who demanded that Jesus explain by what authority did he throw such a fit in the temple area (from Mark 12:1-12). Jesus again chose his words very carefully—answering them with a parable based on the prophet Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard, which warned Israel of impending judgment because of its failure to pursue justice (Isaiah 5:1-7). But, what particularly made Jesus’ answer so agitating to the Jewish leaders that day was that Isaiah’s prophetic words had come to be understood as primarily directed against the temple establishment—words they had conveniently decided to overlook and ignore in order to allow their temple system to thrive—the very system that disgusted Jesus so much. So Jesus’ point was hard to miss—it was a direct, deliberate slap in the face by Jesus to the corrupt Jewish leaders! And, this threat from Jesus, especially taken together with his “temple-tantrum” and the overturning of the temple tables (mentioned above), prompted the Jewish leaders to seek Jesus’ life.

Piece of Evidence #4: Jesus’ Anointing by the Woman

Finally, the fourth piece of evidence against Jesus (also not read aloud, but on which Jill Lum preached about last week)—the one piece of evidence most often overlooked by people of faith these days, was his anointing—by an unnamed woman in the first three

gospels, but John's gospel names the woman as Jesus' friend, Mary—the sister of Lazarus (from Mark 14:3-9). Whoever she was, the woman's actions are a clear indication of Jesus' perception by the common people as the *one, true* Messiah, and her actions very likely would have been reported to the Jewish leaders as quickly as word could travel—the same Jewish leaders with whom Judas had already struck his bargain. So the woman's anointing of Jesus would have been too important to miss, and it would have provided all the more reason to eliminate Jesus, as if the Jewish leaders didn't already have enough motivation to do so.

Summary of the Evidence

In summary, Jesus deliberately entered Jerusalem as the apparent son of King David—the long-awaited Messiah. He then assumed messianic authority in the temple area. Then he appealed to the purpose of the temple in a way that recalled King Solomon's original intent. And, then he was anointed in a manner of messianic significance by at least one follower, which worried the Jewish leaders that the masses may start backing Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings rather than backing them and their authority, regardless of how corrupt they may have been. After all, scripture tells us “the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching” (Mark 11:18).

As a result, more than anything Jesus ever did in three whole years of ministry prior to what we know as *Palm Sunday*, all four of these described actions and pieces of evidence over a 72-hour period meant that Jesus had become a serious political threat to both Jewish and Roman authority—because all four of these actions threatened the status quo. And, neither party wanted the status quo overturned. So it really isn't that surprising that Jesus had succeeded in angering the high priest, Caiaphas, as well as angering the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

No One Saw It Coming

Still, no one who knew and loved Jesus saw coming what happened next—*no one* was prepared. Despite Jesus' warnings and words to his followers, Judas betrayed him and had him arrested, most of his closest friends fled or went into hiding, and before they knew it, Jesus was tortured and killed—and all of it was a complete shock. All of it was totally unanticipated. Even more, as I began saying several weeks ago, the death of Jesus was an embarrassing and demoralizing event for Jesus' early followers and for a young church proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as Savior and Son of God—because in the thinking of the Roman world, sons of God, heroes, and saviors did not die on crosses. So how can the teachings of a man who died so horrifically be considered “good news?”

The Good News!

Well, it's good news because none of the gospels end with Palm Sunday ... or Maundy Thursday ... or even Good Friday. It's good news because no matter how we've treated each other for two thousand years, people of faith are still gathered in places around the world today—places big and small—singing songs, waving palms, and giving praise to the same Jesus of Nazareth who was killed as a criminal. It's good news because we already know what Jesus' closest friends still didn't know at this point—that God's grace and love conquers all the pain, suffering, and ugliness that marred their Passover celebration week so long ago. And, it's good news because Jesus came so that we may have life—so that we may live life abundantly—so that we may live life to the fullest!

Every year on Palm Sunday we sing and say the word “Hosanna!” over and over as we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But, the good news of Jesus Christ is so much bigger than any single word or any single day. So as the psalmist encourages us—not just today, but every single day of our lives—“let us give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 118:1). In other words: God is good ... all the time! All the time ... God is good! Amen!