

5 April 2009

## Life the Way It Was Meant to Be

*(This is the final message in our Lenten series 'Together Again: The Meaning of the Atonement.')*

John 12:12-19

Today we complete our Lent series of messages. These past five weeks may have opened up more questions than they answered, but that's probably a good thing. The sacrifice of Christ is too big to ever really understand completely, and if we're growing in our faith journeys it's something we think about all through the year. But taking six weeks to wrestle with what the Atonement means for our lives is an important part of our church year, and I hope this has been a blessing for you.

Our text this morning is John 12:12-19

*12The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 13They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,*

*"Hosanna!"*

*"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

*"Blessed is the King of Israel!"*

*14Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,*

*15"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion;  
see, your king is coming,  
seated on a donkey's colt."*

*16At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. 17Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. 18Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. 19So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"*

We started this series of messages more than a month ago with a retelling of the story of Humpty Dumpty. We were reminded that there's a sad story at the core of this little poem. Whoever or whatever Humpty Dumpty represents, clearly he's taken a serious fall and is suffering because of it. The sad part is that there seems to be nothing anyone can do to help. 'All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty together again.'

That's a very sad ending, I think.

The point of this series as we reflect and prepare for Easter is that Christ's sacrifice offers us healing for our broken relationships—restoration for the relationships we were meant to have with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.

The Bible describes how our relationships are supposed to be with the word Shalom. We were created to live in a constant, blissful state of perfect Shalom. One writer defined Shalom as 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' That Shalom describes a network of connections that define what life is all about—what life was meant to be.

One of my former pastors preached a sermon on the Trinity a few years back. Rather than try to explain rationally what it meant for God to be three persons at the same time, he said this. 'At the center of the universe, there is a relationship.'

That's important for us because we're made in God's image—that means something for us.

God made us for relationships. That's a central teaching of the Scriptures. God made us for relationships because we're made in his image and he exists in a perfect sort of relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We were made to live in a range of relationships at a range of levels.

But we've taken a serious fall—our ability to live and love and thrive in relationships has been damaged—and no one seems to know how to put it all back together again. I want to make this point as clear as possible as we begin this final countdown to remembering Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the miracle of Easter.

*Jesus the Messiah came and loved, served, taught, ministered, suffered, died, and rose again in order to put our relationships back together—to restore the Shalom God made for us to enjoy from the beginning of time.*

That's it. For all the thinking and writing and philosophizing and wondering about the meaning of life, it really comes down to this one single statement.

*Jesus the Messiah came and loved, served, taught, ministered, suffered, died, and rose again in order to put our relationships back together—to restore the Shalom God made for us to enjoy from the beginning of time.*

In our text this morning, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a challenge to the world of broken Shalom—the world where the relationships God intended for us were twisted and distorted and shattered. Jesus entry into Jerusalem, and the events that followed, were a massive counterattack against anything that tried to prevent God's perfect Shalom from taking its rightful place. That process didn't end on Palm Sunday, or even on Good Friday or Easter, but from the moment Jesus rode into Jerusalem the writing was on the wall.

The sad part was that virtually no one recognized it.

Jesus has been traveling around the countryside and small towns, teaching and healing and training his disciples to carry his message. Along the way he's been confronted by

Romans, by demons, and by the religious leaders of the day. All along he knew that eventually he was going to have to enter Jerusalem—the home of the Jewish faith and the place where the Romans ruled over the region.

When he arrived the people waved palm branches and offered worship to him. They said “Hosanna, hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.” All of that language was tied to the Jewish expectation for a Messiah—the centuries of waiting, now focused on their present situation. They wanted a king—the new King of Israel—and they put their hopes on this healer-teacher they’d been hearing about.

OK, well, now that ‘King of Israel’ part is a problem. Jesus is about to make just about everyone in town angry at him, they just don’t know it yet.

Israel already had a king, and his name was Herod. He was the hereditary ruler who was allowed to keep his throne as long as he didn’t get in Rome’s way. Rome was the real power, and they didn’t like to talk about anyone ruling the world who wasn’t Caesar.

But the real problem was going to come from the people. After being led by their own corrupt king, and taxed and governed by Rome, what the people really wanted was someone to come and overthrow everyone so they could determine their own fate. These folks are not going to be happy with the plan Jesus has to restore relationships and rebuild Shalom.

They’re yelling Hosanna now, but remember that these are the same people who will be shouting “crucify him!” in just a few short days.

The story of Palm Sunday is a story of one great colossal missed opportunity. Christ came to offer something truly amazing—truly life-changing—and the people who should have known better were prepared to settle for a simple political revolution. They would have been happy to conquer the Romans and run things for themselves, even if it meant losing out on the restoration of God’s Shalom.

As you might imagine, there’s a lesson here for us, especially as we reflect on the cross and prepare for the celebration of Easter.

Why is the Cross so important? Why does the Atonement matter?

First, the Atonement matters because it teaches us what the church can be—what the church can do. Scot McKnight, a theologian from North Park Seminary in Chicago, wrote this:

“The mission of Jesus—his vision of the Kingdom—is about restoring the blind, giving limber legs to the lame, wiping the skin of the lepers clean, filling the ears of the deaf with music and sounds, bringing back dead people from the grave, and making sure the poor are taken care of...We cannot back down from this. If this is Jesus’ vision...then the creation of a community where God’s will is done is inherent to the meaning of

atonement.”

That community is us. The church. The Body of Christ. The atonement, more than any Book of Order or set of by-laws or collection of creeds—the Cross of Jesus Christ tells us who and how we’re supposed to be.

Second, the Cross matters because in Christ’s atoning work to restore our relationships, we get a glimpse of what heaven will be like.

McKnight adds this: “Eternity is the society created by God around Jesus Christ wherein people enjoy union with God and communion with one another, in a place where everything works as it did in Eden.”

Most importantly, though, the Atonement matters because it is good news for the relationships we have with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the earth.

Here’s another way we can think about it. It’s in the miracle of Christ’s sacrifice that we see Christian realism at its best. It’s easy to think that we have to suspend most of our reason or our intellect to grasp these matters of faith. It’s easy to think that our beliefs don’t have anything to say about the real world—the place where we spend the other 167 hours of the week.

If broken relationships—the breaking of the Shalom we were meant for—if brokenness is the source of our wounds, from personal sin to corporate corruption to the systemic problems that keep millions of people in this world poor and hungry and captive. If sin is the source of the problems we read about in the news every day, then the remedy for that sin isn’t so detached after all.

The Christian message—the cross as God’s redemptive power—isn’t somehow detached from reality, it names the world’s problems as being relational down to their core, and offers a solution. Here’s that solution, one more time:

*Jesus the Messiah came and loved, served, taught, ministered, suffered, died, and rose again in order to put our relationships back together—to restore the Shalom God made for us to enjoy from the beginning of time.*

In the end, what the Cross represents is God’s work to give us life the way it was meant to be. The Cross reminds us that there is an offer of healing for the relationships we have with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the earth.

This is not a false unity, or even simply the absence of conflict, but rather the deep, rich Shalom that God made us to enjoy. The ‘webbing together of God, humans and creation, in justice, fulfillment and delight.’

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to take a few moments of silence to think about what the Cross means to you. Even if you’ve never considered it before, or if you’re not sure if it means anything to you. Take a silent moment to ask if that gift of

Shalom is something you want to experience.

Amen.