

## Until An Opportune Time

### A Lenten Homily

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My favorite play is a little two-act musical fairy tale called "[The Fantasticks](#)" (music by Harvey Schmidt and lyrics by Tom Jones). In the first act, two best friends, pretending to be bitter enemies, forbid their children (a son and a daughter) to see one another. Sure enough, just as the friends had planned, the boy and girl fall in love. Next, the fathers stage a phony kidnapping, with the boy "rescuing" the girl and so winning her father's "grudging" approval. The first act curtain closes on a smiling, hugging tableau, the cast frozen, as in

a photograph, in a moment of elation: happy ending! When I first saw this play, I turned to my wife, Wendy, and asked, "What could possibly happen now?"

Act two begins with the characters still frozen in their happy-ending poses. But they cannot hold the pose for long. Soon the group hug breaks apart. The best friends discover, now that they are in-laws, a dozen little things they cannot stand about one another. The boy and the girl lose their infatuation and break up. In short, life goes on. "The Fantasticks" turns out to be about what happens *after* the happy ending.

I thought of that play as I read [Luke 4:1-13](#), the biblical basis for the Church's spending 40 days in prayer and fasting during Lent. Jesus, in the wilderness, triumphs over the devil, and the devil "departed from him until an opportune time" ([Luke 4:13](#)). The enemy would be back. Like "The Fantasticks," Luke reminds us that there are no closing-act curtains in life or in history. The action continues—something *always* comes next. We are never "finished."

There is a reason that Lent—like Easter, like Christmas—is not a moment, or even a day, but a *season*. Jesus came to his moment of victory over the enemy after 40 days in fasting and prayer. Of course, this is a problem for our culture of



instant gratification! But it is also a problem for my own Christian tradition, which has so stressed making one's "decision for Christ"—as though once and for all. [Paul, wisely, says](#) not that we have *been* saved, but that we are *being* saved (1 Cor. 15:2)—we are on the way.

In this life, we are never "finished"—for good or for ill. No matter how good it gets, no matter how often we succeed, the enemy will return, "at an opportune time." The danger of our ever thinking, self-righteously, that we have *arrived* is that when trials come—as they *will* come, when the enemy returns—we will be unprepared, and may be undone.



In Luke, the "opportune time" does come. The enemy makes another personal appearance: when "Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve" ([Luke 22:3](#)). This time, the enemy appears victorious: Jesus is betrayed, arrested, tried, condemned, tortured to death.

Yet even this is not the end! As we will celebrate when these 40 days of preparation are ended, Jesus rose victorious over sin, death, hell, and the grave, and is alive forevermore!

In this life, we are never "finished," friends—no matter how *bad* it gets, no matter how often we fail. God is still at work—in me, in Christ's church, in our world. Confident in the power of Jesus' resurrection, we need never lose heart! For while on this side of eternity there are no closing-act curtains, ultimately, finally, the victory belongs to Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God.

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## Palm Sunday from the Left-Hand Side of the Bible

### A Lenten Lesson

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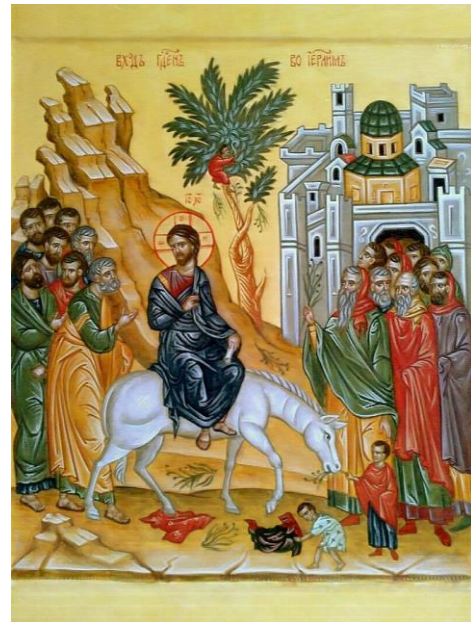


Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday, marks the beginning of Holy Week, leading up to the remembrance of Jesus' death on the cross—and, of course, ultimately to the celebration of his resurrection, which makes possible our own. We Christians may think that now, of all times, our proclamation must stick to the uniquely Christian scriptures on the right-hand side of our Bibles. But in truth, we cannot understand the Gospels' account of this day without looking at three passages in particular from the Hebrew Bible.

Curiously, [Zechariah 9:9-12](#) is not one of the lectionary readings for Palm Sunday in any year, although Matthew and John both quote Zechariah 9:9 in their accounts of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem ([Matt. 21:5](#) and [John 12:15](#); see also [Mark 11:1-11](#) and [Luke 19:28-40](#), which both use the word *polon*, "colt," found in the Septuagint's Greek translation of Zech. 9:9):

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion.  
Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem.  
Look, your king will come to you.  
He is righteous and victorious.  
He is humble and riding on an ass,  
on a colt, the offspring of a donkey.

Applying to this passage a deliberately wooden literalism, Matthew describes Jesus as entering Jerusalem somehow mounted on both an ass *and* her colt ([Matt. 21:6-7](#))! This bizarre image was doubtless intended to ram the point home for making absolutely certain that the reader could not miss the connection between Jesus' actions and the prophet's words. As the early Christian teacher Theodoret of Cyrus records, "This acquires a clear interpretation in actual events: the king who is prophesied has come" (*Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, trans. Robert Charles Hill [Brookline: Holy Cross, 2006], 256).



The CEB's translation "righteous and victorious" (Zech. 9:9) is difficult to understand. The Hebrew reads *tsaddiq wenosha'*. The first term means "righteous," perhaps defending "the royal legitimacy of the king" (so Carol and Eric Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14*; AB 25c [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993], 127; note that the NRSV has "triumphant"), although it may also refer to his morality (the Aramaic *Targum Nebi'im* has *zaqay*, meaning "innocent"). The second term is a passive participle meaning, literally, "one who is saved" (reflected also in the Aramaic of *Tg. Neb.*). The Septuagint renders this word as *sozon*, an active participle ("saving"). David Petersen, who translates these two words as "righteous and victorious," says that the Greek reading "seems to be the required sense" (*Zechariah 9—14 and Malachi*, OTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995], 55). Carol and Eric Meyers, however, stay with the plain sense of the Hebrew: "[The LORD] is victorious over the enemies, with the result that the king is 'saved,' thereby enabled to assume power" (Meyers and Meyers 1993, 127). In short, here we have a notion of kingship that is already transformed, grounded not in dynastic and regal pomp and power but in God's own salvation and deliverance.

As this passage unfolds, it continues to draw distinctions between this king and other, previous kings. The humble mount in Zechariah 9:9 derives from a long tradition of kingly processions (Meyers and Meyers 1993, 129). By riding an ass rather than a war horse or chariot, the king shows humility and declares that he comes in peace. But this time, the prophet declares, it's not just for show! *This* king truly *is* humble, and he comes not only *in* peace but also to *bring* peace:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the warhorse from Jerusalem.  
The bow used in battle will be cut off;  
he will speak peace to the nations.  
His rule will stretch from sea to sea,  
and from the river to the ends of the earth ([v. 10](#)).

In the Persian period, the province (called a "satrapy") to which Judah belonged was Abar-Nahara, that is, the lands "Beyond the River," across the Euphrates and west toward the Mediterranean Sea. "[F]rom the river to the ends of the earth" seems to envision Jerusalem's sway extended throughout this region. Further, the mention of Ephraim (the largest of the northern tribes, often used to represent the entire northern kingdom of Israel, as in, e.g., [Isa. 7:2](#); [Jer. 7:15](#); [Ezek. 37:19](#); [Hos. 5:3](#)) shows that this renewed



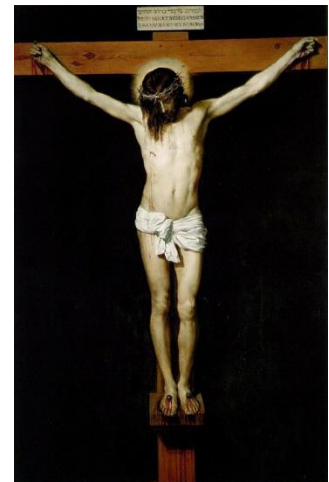
kingdom will include those formerly excluded, the “lost tribes” from the northern kingdom destroyed and dispersed by the Assyrians long before.

It is little wonder that this passage, with its transformed view of kingship, so captured the imagination of the Gospel writers. While the first Christians confessed Jesus as *christos*, the term used in the Septuagint for Hebrew *meshiakh* (“Messiah”), it is clear that their understanding (and Jesus’ own understanding) of what it meant to *be* “Messiah” transformed that image. [Mark 1:1](#) identifies Jesus not only as *Christos*, or Messiah, but also as “the Son of God.” While related to the idea of the king as God’s adopted son ([Pss. 2:45](#)), this confession goes much further than any Jewish conception of Messiah: Jesus the Messiah *is* God!

This confession creates new problems, which raise the need for the church to affirm that “Jesus Christ has come as a human” ([1 John 4:2](#); see also [John 1:14](#)). But while Christian confessions about Jesus exalt the role of Messiah far beyond traditional Jewish expectations, they at the same time *subvert* the idea of Messiah as king. In debate with the Pharisees, who believed in a literal future Messiah ([Matt. 22:41-46](#)), Jesus asks, “*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*” “*David’s son,*” they reply (Matt. 22:42).

In response, Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1: “The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right side until I turn your enemies into your footstool.’” Assuming the speaker to be David (the title of this psalm after all identifies it as a psalm of David), Jesus asks, “If David calls him [that is, the Messiah] Lord, how can he be David’s son?” (Matt. 22:45). Although Matthew’s genealogy takes pains to demonstrate Jesus’ descent from David ([Matt. 1:6, 17](#)), Christ is more than another Davidic king!

Particularly subversive of traditional Messianic expectation is the Christian view that the Christ must be understood in terms of suffering. Thus, in Mark, Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is the Christ is inadequate: faced with Jesus’ determination to suffer and die, Peter rebukes him and is in turn himself rebuked by Jesus ([Mark 8:29-33](#)). Indeed, in Mark, the first human to make a full confession about Jesus is his executioner, who declares when Jesus dies, “This man was certainly God’s Son” ([Mark 15:39](#)). It may well be that Jesus understood his own role in terms of Isaiah’s [Servant of the LORD](#) ([Isa. 42:1-9](#); [49:1-7](#); [50:4-11](#); and [52:13—53:12](#)). Certainly, early Christians did (see [1 Cor. 15:3](#); [Acts 8:32-35](#); [1 Pet. 2:22-25](#)), and the idea must have come from somewhere (cf. [Matt. 8:17](#); [12:18-21](#); [20:28](#); [Mark 9:12](#); [10:45](#); [Luke 22:37](#)). In any case, for early Christians, the image of the peaceful and humble king in Zechariah 9:9-10 was the perfect representation of Jesus.



Luke’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry lacks one familiar feature: it says nothing of the crowd of people shouting “Hosanna!” As is typical of Luke, who writes as a Gentile for a Gentile audience, he often avoids Jewish or Semitic elements (which is why Luke 23:33 uses the Greek *Kranion* [“The Skull”] rather than the Aramaic Golgotha for the place where Jesus is crucified; the KJV of Luke 23:33 uses the Latin Calvary; both words also mean “skull”). Still, “Hosanna!” is woven into our Palm Sunday hymns, and into our liturgies. In Matthew, Mark, and John’s accounts, the crowds shout “Hosanna!” the way we might cheer at a ball game:

Those in front of him and those following were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!” ([Mark 11:9-10](#); cf. [Matt. 21:9 and John 12:13](#)).

“Hosanna” comes from 118:25, which reads in Hebrew:

*‘ana’ YHWH hoshi’ah na’*  
*‘ana’ YHWH hatslikhah na’.*

In Judaism, this Psalm is part of the [Hallel](#) (Psalms 113—118), sung in festivals and particularly at Pesach, or [Passover—the](#) feast that in today’s reading brought these crowds on pilgrimage from across the Roman world to Jerusalem. The first two psalms in the Hallel are sung before the Passover meal, and the last four are sung after it. So the Hallel would have been in the air, for any Jewish community, surrounding Pesach. Little wonder the words of the Hallel come so readily to the lips of the crowd.

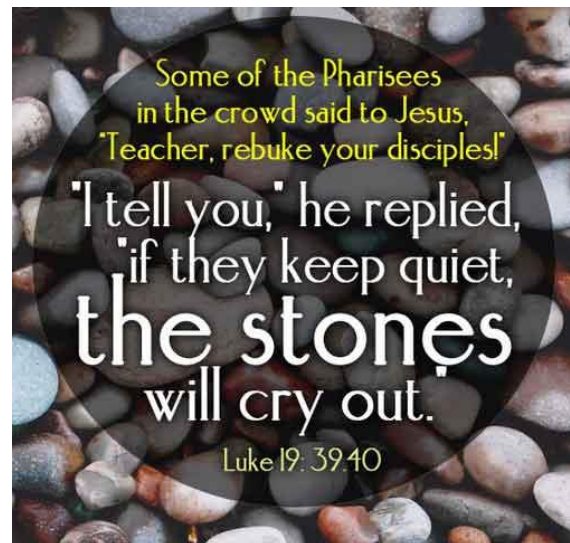
So, Habakkuk declares, robbing the poor to set up strong and secure houses will bring the wealthy of Jerusalem no security. Instead of gaining security, by the pursuit of dishonest gain “You plan shame for your own house”—here, the family rather than the physical structure—and indeed are “sinning against your [NRSV, ‘you have forfeited’] your own life” (2:10).

The CEB of Habakkuk 2:11 reads, “A stone will cry out from a village wall, and a tree branch will respond.” The NRSV reads, “The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.” The word rendered “tree branch” in the CEB and “plaster” in the NRSV is the Hebrew *kaphis*, found only here in the Hebrew Bible. From its use elsewhere, however, it seems best to render it as “beam” or “rafter” (see the [KJV](#) and [NIV](#) of this passage). In short, the houses themselves (here, the buildings once more) will witness against their wicked owners!

In Luke’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus alludes to Habakkuk 2:11. When the Pharisees’ demand that Jesus silence his obstreperous followers, Jesus says, “I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out” ([Luke 19:40](#)). Jesus, like the prophet Habakkuk, opposes the religious and secular leadership of Judah for refusing to hear the outcry of the poor—something we might miss entirely if we didn’t know where Jesus’ words were coming from!

Brothers, sisters, friends, as you worship and teach and preach this week, let your proclamation be enriched by the *whole* of Scripture! God be with you.

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**Christ is Risen!**  
**An Easter Invitation to Celebrate**

**The Rev. Dr. Steven S. Tuell**  
**James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament**



Since I discovered Laurent de la Hyre's "Christ Appears to the Three Marys" (1606) two years ago, it has become my favorite Easter image:

—I love the joyous surprise on every face,  
including the face of Jesus!

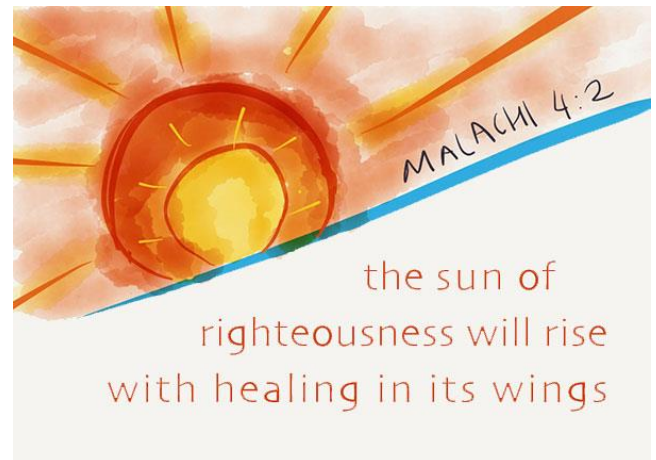
—I love that their hands are not quite touching  
him as he ascends into glory: radiantly alive,  
at once in our world of time and space and  
transcending it.

This painting is Easter in a bag!



And so is this poem by one of my favorite poets, e.e. cummings:

*i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes  
(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)  
how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?  
(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*



May this Easter find you, like the Marys, like Jesus himself, overwhelmed with joy "for most this amazing" gift of life, from "most this amazing" God!

Brothers, sisters, friends, Christ is risen!