Good morning!

We have two challenges when we are trying to communicate the Bible to folks in today’s world. The first is that people are, increasingly, unfamiliar with the stories of the Bible. You have perhaps dropped an allusion to what would have been commonly understood in cultural touchstone in the past, say Palm Sunday or “the prodigal son,” but fewer and fewer people in our society were raised in Sunday School. They have never heard of these or *any* Bible stories. In my teaching I want to explain what is going on so someone who has no familiarity with the Bible can get some orientation to the stories.

The other problem is that, to those of us who know them, they have become ***so*** familiar that we don’t really “hear” them anymore.

For both of these reasons I discourage romanticized readings of biblical texts because they keep us from experiencing the visceral challenges that confronted Jesus; the same challenges that confront us in our own culture as well. Palm Sunday and the “triumphal entry” to Jerusalem are among those scenes.

I want to talk about a few items on this joyous event in Jesus’ life – in our final song this morning we are going to celebrate and exult in the moment of the joyous entry to Jerusalem that day. I promise I will end us on a high note today.

But, I also think it is essential remind ourselves that the meaning of this celebration as Jesus entered Jerusalem in the last week of his life, derives its meaning from the fact that it is an event on the edge of his darkest days. It is this *contrast*, this *juxtaposition*, from joy to grief, from light to darkness that gives the story its power. It is almost the very definition of irony in a way.

And then I will attempt to bring our House of Listening theme to bear on Jesus’ entrance to the city and the cascading events that led to his crucifixion just a few days later.

The heart of Passover festival is deliverance from the Egyptian oppressors through the ***Exodus***. That’s what Passover is, the Jewish people paint their doorposts with the blood of a lamb and the angel of death passes over their homes killing the first-born of the Egyptians and sparing their own (see Ex 11). The angel of death *passes over* their homes.

It is the first day of Jewish year, it is a day of remembrance.

In the Jewish liturgical tradition, the “Egyptian Hallel,” Psalms 113 through 118, are the traditional readings at Passover meal, the seder.

Chapters 113 and 114 are read ***before*** the meal and 115-118 are read ***after*** the meal. Psalm 118 is called the ***Song of Victory*** (and thus the name of my message today), possibly an antiphonal Psalm with parts called out in response. For example… O give thanks to the Lord… Let Israel say…Let the house of Aaron say…Let those who fear the Lord say… and so on (Ps 118:1-4).

You may have noticed that in the passage Matt 26:30, after the institution of the Lord’s Supper, it says When they had sung the hymn, they went to the Mount of Olives. It was probably some version of Psalm 118.

This triumphal entry was at Passover, and everything about Jesus last week of life needs to be understood in that context. So, two weeks ago, we looked at the cleansing of the Temple in terms of the vast crowds of Passover and its impact on the Temple economy, and last week we looked at the argument from Hebrews that Jesus was acting as a sort of Platonic ideal of a high priest, the perfect high priest, who was making a Passover sacrifice as he gave his life for us.

This week we look at the entrance to the city, although the chronology is off since this happened first. That is the way the lectionary orders its texts so we can have Palm Sunday the week before Easter..

Notice these allusions to the Song of Victory in the story of Jesus’s entrance to the city:

First we see the heart of Jesus’ ministry for the dispossessed and poor.

* He raises the poor from the dust,
    and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with princes,
    with the princes of his people…
Praise the Lord! (Psalm 113:7-9)

We see the allusion to entering the gates of Jerusalem.

* Open to me the gates of righteousness,
    that I may enter through them
    and give thanks to the Lord. (Psalm 118:19)

The notion here is that of a king returning from a victory to the City of David. Everybody in the crowd knows this allusion, because it’s Passover and this is the traditional text associated with that day. Victory over Egyptians, now… a poke at the Romans! Its genius- you criticize the occupiers without mentioning them.

And then our special emphasis today in the festal procession with palm branches. This is Palm Sunday, the Liturgy of the Palms for us:

* Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
    We bless you from the house of the Lord…
Bind the festal procession with branches,
    up to the horns of the altar. (Psalm 118:26-27)

To this passage the crowds add Hosanna to the Son of David…Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David (Matt 21:9; Mark 11:10) - very powerful conjunction of ideas!

Certainly the scene has echoes of the joyous procession led by David as he brought the ark of God up to “the horns of the altar” in the city in 2 Samuel 6:12-15.

The altar of the Temple had four actual horns on it (Ex 27:2). The horn is the symbol of kingly power, even with an inference to the Messiah (Ps 148:14; Ezek 29:21). Therefore I will cause a horn to sprout up for David (Ps 132:17).

As for the colt motif, Jacob, speaking to his twelve sons in Gen 49 just before he dies, prophesies about the scepter of the king of the house of Judah, it shall not depart…which would persist in the tribe in Genesis 49:10-11, he describes the king …and his donkey’s colt.[[1]](#endnote-1) …binding his colt to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine (v 11).

In 2 Kings 9:13 the servants of King Jehu spread their cloaks on the ground, emulating “homage extended to a newly anointed king” (Neale, Luke 9-24, p. 190)

And the stone that the builders rejected is found in Psalm 118:22, The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Jesus quotes the verse referring to himself in Mark 12:10.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The point of all this is that the lens through which we view the procession into the city is the Egyptian Hallel of Psalm 113-118. It resonates intertextually through out the scene and it is, no doubt, how Jesus viewed the event and its importance.

But…While the people in the crowd that day may have been hoping for a tangible victory, even a revolutionary event around this messianic visitor to depose what was widely viewed as a corrupted priesthood, to oust the Roman oppressor…Jesus was not among them.

Now let me talk about what he was walking in to from the perspective of the priestly hierarchy.

160 years before Jesus, a man name Judas Maccabaeus leads a revolt against Greek rule and establish an independent Judea once again – the dawn of a golden era where Judea is ruled by this Hasmonean family, with its leader being both king and high priest. To put this in perspective, there were eight rulers in the 100 years of independence that followed beginning around 140 BC.

At the end of that time, Herod of the Bible (37 years before Jesus and under whose reign Jesus was born) took Jerusalem, conquered the Maccabees and began his rule as a client king for Rome.

This corrupt client king appointed the high priests thereafter. Often he and eventually all Roman authorities would change them almost every year. So much so that in the next 100 years there would be 28 high priests, up until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

There were taxes the people hated, but there were a lot of good things about Roman occupation such as the rebuilding of the Temple under Herod and the general peace that Palestine enjoyed. But the corruption of high priestly succession was the most incendiary issue of Roman occupation.

Guess which high priest lasted the longest during that period. Caiaphas, who served for 18 years under 4 different procurators/governors.

Do you know how you survive in that kind of political context? You never… never… do anything to imperil the interests of the occupying force, nor that imperil your own grasp on power.

It is to this man’s house that Jesus’ case is escalated that Passover week. The dusty Galilean peasant prophet goes from Nazareth, to the gates of Jerusalem, to the very house of the High Priest we are told.

Yes, he overturned the tables, yes he said enough of this debasement of my House of Listening, and if you think he was going to get justice that day you are very, very naïve.

Jesus knew what he was walking into.

Caiaphas and the highest-ranking scribes and elders of Judaism, the leaders of the Jewish world, and the pathetic accusers were brought forward one after the other. I always point out this is a condemnation of the corruption of Jewish practice, not Judaism itself. Corrupt Christian leaders should also be exposed and opposed. Same standard.

Caiaphas finally said to Jesus, “Are you the Messiah.” Jesus said, ‘…you have said so…’

And in the heat of the moment Caiaphas tore his robes, sentenced Jesus to death and sent him back to Pilate (Mk 14:53f//Matt 26:57ff). There was only one person listening to God in that room.

The robes of the High Priest were profoundly symbolic of his rank before God. The actual vestments for high festivals were so important symbolically that they were kept in one of the Towers of the Antonia, guarded by the 600, to prevent usurpation of them as a symbol. Think about the capture of your enemies’ flag or banner as a symbol of victory. What if revolutionaries broke in and stole the robes? Rome had Caiaphas’s back.

Politically there was no other option open to Caiaphas anyway. He was jammed up in a bad way in the House of Things. If he set Jesus free he would have exposed himself to Roman wrath. Matthew tells us that the whole city was in turmoil as Jesus entered the city that day saying, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matt 21:10-11).

From the Text

I want to talk about Caiaphas and lessons for living in this.

We can say that all that happened in that week was part of a vast inevitability: Jesus crucified, a new era in salvation history inaugurated according to the plan and foreknowledge of God.

Was Caiaphas merely a pawn being moved around by God? O? is there something the man can teach us. Let’s see if there is anything, even if it is cautionary, that we can learn from such a prominent member of the House of Things.

The first lesson I take from this is a simple one … be careful of decisions made in anger. They are satisfying in the moment but sometimes years of regret can follow. The House of Listening requires of us patience and forbearance in all things.

Second, I’m sure Caiaphas regretted that day the rest of his life, knowing that he had sent an innocent man, a holy man, a man who had committed no real crime, to a horrible death. I don’t think Caiaphas was a monster. He is one of those men who is remembered in history for one moment of lapsed judgment.

How could you live with yourself? The price of not listening is high, the price of losing your soul is great, the House of Things is ultimately a House of Misery in life.

But Caiaphas’ life after that day was also a life of regret, as our Acts series will show in the weeks following Easter, because the burgeoning Christian movement, The Way (hē ōdos), to whom he handed Jesus as a martyr, who in the ultimate victory of Jesus over his enemies, was resurrected from the dead…..made his life a misery for the remainder of his tenure.

Caiaphas is never mentioned again in the Bible, but he was to stay in the role for another six or seven years and had to deal with the tumult the new followers brought to Jerusalem, culminating in another martyrdom (Stephen) and the expulsion of Christians from Jerusalem, probably under his tenure.

But now… today… we celebrate the path of Jesus into the House of Listening. In this presentation you will see, properly, the balance of the joy that day and allusions to the events of the week to come – and, of course, we look forward ultimately to his victory to come through his resurrection from the dead, the plan of God laid down from the foundation of the world, for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

Amen

1. As to the donkey, the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery says, “The donkey was the conveyance of kings (1 Kings 1:33) and that the colt was tied up is an allusion to Gen 49:11. This is a text about Jacob’s prophecy over Judah which had a messianic interpretation in rabbinic sources” (DBI, 215). Interestingly, of this king it says in Gen 49 …he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk (Gen 49:11). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A reference to Isa 8:14-15: 14 He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)