

The Church of the Good Shepherd
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Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

*Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth,
and in the next, life everlasting.*

This is Palm Sunday, the last day of the season in Lent. On this day, we commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in fulfillment of what the prophet Zechariah wrote of the coming of Zion's King: "See your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." By this act, Jesus makes a dramatic, powerful, and, ultimately dangerous, declaration that he, Jesus of Galilee, was the rightful and ordained King of Israel.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, the people celebrate his arrival by laying down their cloaks and small branches of trees in front of him, and singing the verses of Psalm 118 – "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" It is thought that the symbolism of the donkey may refer to the Eastern tradition that it is an animal of peace, versus the horse, which is an animal of war. A king would have ridden a horse when he was bent on war and ridden a donkey to symbolize his arrival in peace. This also reinforces the theological claim made in the nativity story that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, in contrast to Caesar and the legions of Roman soldiers also entering Jerusalem at this time to subdue the crowds gathered for the Jewish celebration of Passover.

This is also Passion Sunday, which marks the beginning of Holy Week, in which we remember the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem leading to his betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death. And to we prepare ourselves for this arc of Holy Week, we have a dramatic reading of the Passion Narrative.

This is a bittersweet day – one filled with drama and shocking contrast. We begin our worship with Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the shouts of Hosanna, and almost immediately take a sharp and surprising turn to the cross, where this story inevitably must go. Along with the crowds in Jerusalem, we celebrate in the promise of the joyful procession, cheering and rejoicing for the coming King. And with those same crowds, we also turn against this King and savior and shout "Let him be crucified". There is a reason we invite the gathered faithful to say these parts, lest we think that we are better than them. For it was folk just like us who shouted those nasty words. And, I daresay, if Jesus were to have entered the human stage in our time, we likely would have done just the same.

The passion story is so very, and sadly, human, isn't it? Don't we see the same patterns over and over again, in many ways both large and small? It seems to be our nature to raise up leaders and heroes, whether political, religious, or celebrity, only to perversely rejoice in tearing them back down again. We give them life and then endeavor to bring about their death. We so very quickly are ready to turn our shouts of joyful "Hosanna!" to the bitter cries of "Crucify him!"

And yet, as disciples of Christ, this is also our path – this is our journey as the ones called to follow Jesus. This path before us is the way that may (or may not) involve adulation but always leads to the cross and death. Fortunately, the path doesn't end there, for this costly journey that leads to the cross also carries us through and beyond the cross.

This week the Church also remembers Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was martyred on April 9th, in 1945. Bonhoeffer was an anti-Nazi dissident and a key founding member of the Confessing Church, a Protestant group that resisted Hitler and the Nazi Party. His resistance efforts led to his arrest in 1943, and from his jail cell he helped plan an assassination of Adolf Hitler, fearing the greater evil yet to be unleashed. The assassination attempt failed and when Bonhoeffer's involvement was discovered he was sent to a concentration camp and later a prison, where he served as a chaplain until he was hanged in 1945, at the age of 39.

One of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's best-known published works is his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he differentiates between what he termed "cheap grace" and the "costly grace" to which all

disciples of Christ are called. According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace is the grace that costs nothing, that requires no effort on behalf of the believer. Cheap grace is the grace that appears to be always available, and to which we are always entitled, because Christ had already completed redemption for us. Cheap grace is the merest veil of grace, without structure, discipline, or depth, that gently covers us and requires no difficult changes. Rather than the divine grace that God bestows upon us, unearned and unmerited, Bonhoeffer writes that cheap grace is that “grace we bestow upon ourselves”¹. Consequently, it requires no commitment, no repentance, no change in one’s life. As such, Bonhoeffer states that cheap grace justifies not the sinner but the sin and the world.²

Alternatively, costly grace requires a *response* and action from the believer. Bonhoeffer writes, “Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*.”³ According to Bonhoeffer, we are each called to discipleship, to follow Jesus and all that entails, and we are given the divine grace to do so. The grace that flows from following that call may be costly indeed, however is the only grace from which flows the true life promised by Christ. For, it is the grace that redeems, renews, and sustains us.

It is my experience that cheap grace is fleeting and shallow. When in times of crisis, cheap grace lacks the deep roots sufficient to sustain faith through the drought or to ground and support faith through the high winds and drowning rain. The costly grace that I’ve received grew from a faith that required me to walk in the difficult steps of discipleship. It is in following Christ on his way that leads to the cross and death, that I have found my true life. The faith that now sustains me today has been and continues to be costly indeed, but it is this costly faith that I value most.

In no time more powerful than the present do I find myself relying on this costly grace. This year has been a Lent like none other than I have ever experienced. Who knew how much we would have to fast – how much we would have to sacrifice? Day by day in this season, we have had to give up so much that is dear to us to walk the rocky and lonely path through desert. We’ve had to give up in-person connections and community, school, financial security, employment security, public activities and entertainment, and freedom of travel and movement.

We’ve been bombarded with confusing and conflicting messages and had the comfort of our illusions of safety, health, and wealth stripped away. Not in a generation or more, have we had to surrender so much security so quickly and completely. To shed it all and journey into strange lands and fierce landscapes without purse, staff, or cloak, and to journey solely supported by our costly faith received through the demanding rigors of discipleship. Yet, God has always promised that when we walk in faith, grace and mercy will be with us.

Today, we begin Holy Week – that most holy of journeys. While this journey leads to death, we do not lose ourselves to despair, because we know how the story continues. ***The end is not really the end and what happens after the end is merely the beginning.*** New life awaits, if we are courageous enough to follow the One who always goes before us. As we now leave the desert of Lent and journey the rough road of Holy Week, may we have the fortitude to stay on the road that leads us to the cross, trusting that it will also lead us beyond the cross and to new and everlasting life in Christ.

Amen.

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, “The Cost of Discipleship” (Touchstone: New York, NY, 1995), p. 44

² Ibid., 50

³ Ibid., 45