

Philippians 2:5-11 ~ Luke 22:14-23  
 Entering the Passion of Jesus: To Jerusalem and Beyond (5<sup>th</sup> of 5 Sermon Series)  
*The Last Supper: Stay with Me! Risking the Loss of Friends*  
 Palm/Passion Sunday ~ April 14, 2019  
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### **Introduction to Scripture**

It's time to eat! No more waiting. The table is set, the meal is ready. You can almost hear the dinner bell gong reverberating in the build up to the story I am about to read. For those preparing a special meal, it can be a fraught moment: "Will the broccoli over cook? Is the bread warm enough? I forgot to get the butter out. And, who will say the blessing?" Yes, there will definitely be a blessing because the meal in the story we are about to hear isn't just any meal. It's the most important meal of the year for Jesus and all Jews: the beginning of the Passover holiday, the highest holy day, commemorating Israel's exodus from Egypt, when they escaped from slavery to freedom.

This is not just any Passover meal. This is Jesus' last meal, his last supper with his besties: his closest friends and companions in all the world. The word "companion" literally means "the ones you share bread with" and this is exactly what they are about to do. Bread that will be bread and so much more. This is the last time Jesus will share a meal with his disciples. He knows this, but they likely did not. And Jesus is psyched, according to Luke. We can't know all the reasons why. But we can hear it in his first words as soon as he takes his place at the table, "I have eagerly desired to eat this meal with you." And it will become the most important meal for all who follow Christ.

The hour has come. The table is set. At last! This Lent of 2019, we've spent our 34 days so far building up to this hour. This Lent, we got a head start pondering the Passion of Jesus, his final Week on earth, day by day, with some help from Amy-Jill Levine's book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. From Sunday, Entering Jerusalem on a donkey, to Monday going into the Temple upsetting the tables, to Tuesday's teaching in the temple by lifting up the actions of the poor widow with her two lepta offering, then last Sunday's sermon on the Wednesday at Simon the Leper's table, affirming the extravagance of the anointing woman as she broke open the alabaster jar and poured a year's wages worth of nard on Jesus head. All those days led up to this one, Thursday and now we are in the upper room.

The hour has come. Our Holy Week officially begins today on Palm Sunday. And now we will enter that Upper Room. There is a place for you at this table. Jesus is there already, waiting. Eagerly waiting. He has something he wants you to do. Something he wants us to do. Let's have a listen, before the bread gets cold.

### **Sermon**

The hour has come for the Army of the Dead to clash with the citizens of Westeros, as a separate battle for power unfolds for the Iron Throne. Yes, tonight the much-anticipated final season of the Game of Thrones HBO series begins. How will it end? No one knows. But you can spend plenty of time online researching theories and countertheories. It has so many plots and subplots. My young adult daughters actually warned me against getting involved with this show. "It's too complicated mom. It would take too long for you to figure it out."

This morning, we begin another plot, the final week of the King of Kings, Lord of Lords who comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. And like the Game of Thrones, it is also bloody. But it is no game, and the blood is not ours. It is our Lord's freely given that all may live. For this King, there is not

just one set of citizens, but all of creation to save. And this plot is not that complicated to tell. Truly the plot lines all lead to this table. And to these simple, world changing words of Jesus, “Do this.”

Palm Sunday, Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem was so jubilant (surely our combined Adult & children’s choir anthem sang out this jubilation loud and clear). And yet it was so fleeting, it throws in our faces the conflict inside each of us, the choice which God gives to us. Let’s be honest: we all have a “hosanna” side and a “crucify” side, deep inside us. We want to and do break bread with Jesus and we *also* can and do betray him. All of us. Not just Judas.

Let’s think about Judas for a moment. Judas was at the table. Judas shared in that last meal – Jesus did not choose to exclude him or to “out him” by naming him as the betrayer. Instead Jesus chose to include him in that last meal and to also acknowledge the presence of his betrayer among them, “His hand is on the table. Judas’ hand was on the table. Judas ate the bread and drank the cup. Didn’t he know he had a chance of being redeemed? We will never know why he was unable to hear or to believe there would be a choice for him. Was it something others said to him that pushed him beyond the breaking point? In Luke’s and Matthew’s narratives, Judas ended his own life. He committed suicide and left the rest of us to interpret, to fill in the blanks as to why. He was not the first in our Bible to commit suicide after betraying a friend. “Ahithophel, one of King David’s advisors had affiliated himself with David’s son, Absalom, who was leading a civil war, and in that capacity, attempted to betray David. We are told in 2 Samuel 17:23, “he set his house in order, and hanged himself.”<sup>i</sup>

I want to say a word about the tragedy of suicide, especially as the rate of suicide is rising to public health crisis level here in our country. “The Bible never explicitly condemns suicide; it is never called an unforgivable sin. The suicides of Ahithophel and Judas are the acts of desperate people, people who believe they have failed their friends or their families, people who cannot live with the guilt of what they have done.”<sup>ii</sup> That is what we can guess from the accounts of their lives in the Bible. Around every suicide there are always more questions than answers. The reason I raise the issue here today is because Jesus is the Truth and calls us as a church to talk truth about hard things, like suicide. To ignore it would be to miss the healing message and miss the call to action I hear for all of us at this table, when the hour had come.

At this Table of grace, I hear Jesus saying “Stay with me. I am with you, I am not leaving you, or abandoning you no matter what. What you must do is stay with me.” I hear Jesus saying this to any who are considering suicide. I also hear Jesus calling all of us to do our best to be the friend who shares this message, maybe in words maybe by saying nothing, but simply staying with a person who is on the edge. We can do this. We can be the friend who will not let go. The friend who stays with. We can notice who is not at the table and reach out to them. We can be the one who refuses to demonize any other human being. Because we have taken the bread, Jesus gives us the ability and the accountability to “do this.” We can thank Judas for calling us out on this one.

Jesus says “Stay with me” and do the work to which I am calling you. Who is Jesus calling you to stay with? Who is or what group of people are on the edge, not sure if they can hang on any longer or not? The distance between being OK and not OK can collapse in a heartbeat. For any of us. Jesus, our King in a short heartbeat went from parade hero to pariah: he was given a crown not of gold, but of piercing, pricking, sharp, unyielding thorns. And his throne was a cross: not for sitting on, but for hanging from. That’s the love unknown. That’s the Love that will not let any of us go, no matter what we do to him. Not even if (and when) we crucify him. This side of Easter we know that. We can tell this plot line. But is this the story, is this the kingdom we inhabit?

There was a tragic story in the London Sunday Times, of something that happened after the devastating earthquake in Armenia a few years ago. It was about a mother and her little child who were trapped under tons of concrete when their building collapsed. They had just enough space to huddle together. They lay there for a whole week in the darkness without food or water. The little girl begged for water, but of course there was none. In desperation, the mother found a piece of broken glass and cut her finger. She urged the little girl to suck the bleeding finger, the only liquid she had to keep her daughter alive. "Please mama," the little girl begged, "cut another finger for me." Fortunately, a few days later the little girl and her mother were rescued. Surely the little girl would not have been spared without the self-sacrificial act of her mother. The mother did what she had to do to save her child. She found a way to be at table with her daughter in that dark, desperate moment. Jesus gives us that power.

I will end with one more story that happened while we were at table yesterday. This was a folding table in the Minneapolis Community Emergency Services warehouse where four of our eleven middle school youth on the Urban Immersion Service Retreat, Dan Crump and I had just spent three hours sorting and boxing over 2,000 pounds of food for distribution to hungry people in the Minneapolis area. I can tell you: it felt good to sit down on those metal chairs at that folding table and open up our bag lunches we'd made earlier that morning. I can't remember which of the boys, whether it was Keller, Tony, Kai, or Jake, who said this. But one of them said to the group, "you know if people who can't stand each other would just sit down and drink tea and talk across the table, they would find a way to get along." I asked him to explain a little more about what he meant. The others chimed in. They talked about how there was so much shouting and arguing about politics and everything else that could be figured out if people just sat down, over food and drink and listened and talked. Wouldn't that be good?" They were talking about the power of the Table of grace, given to us, for us through Christ. The power to choose to break bread rather than to betray Christ and the power of Divine Love.

At our session meeting just before worship, our seven new members were doing some faith sharing and our elders were sharing some of their experiences here at FPC. One of them said, "well, we Presbyterians are doers." Indeed. I truly believe, as Jesus does, that "we can do this."

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<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2018), 118.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.