

“JESUS’ MARCH TO BONDAGE, DEATH, LIBERATION.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

April 10, 2022, 10:30 AM

Texts for the Sermon: Isaiah 61:1-3; Matthew 21:1-11

Prayer:

Holy Father, since our whole salvation depends on our true understanding of your Holy Word, free us from worldly affairs, earthly distractions and carnal thoughts, and enable us to hear and understand your Word with faith, so that we may rightly discern your will and bear fruit for your glory, in Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction.

In 1914 just after the beginning of WWI the famous British author H.G. Wells wrote a book, *The War That Will End All Wars.*

Many thought at the time it would be, but of course that bubble was soon burst. Just 25 years later the world was at war again and we are again today.

On the same day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor they also carried out a major attack on the Philippines. We had a large military presence there under the command of General MacArthur. That became the first major land battle for American troops. For five months the poorly equipped and poorly supplied US and Filipino troops fought against superior numbers.

In March of 1942 General MacArthur went to Australia to get help with his famous promise, “I shall return.” A month later we suffered one of the most devastating military defeats in American history, and the largest surrender of US armed forces in history when on April 9, 1942, Major General King surrendered to the Japanese army. All of a sudden the Japanese had more POWs than they could deal with.

Today, April 10, 2022, marks the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Bataan Death March. The Japanese force marched 76,000 prisoners of war, 66,000 Filipino and 10,000 Americans, 70 miles over 7 days, to a prison camp.

Of those 75,000 emaciated, malnourished, physically weak soldiers who started the march with little or no sleep, food or water, 54,000 reached the prison camp in the middle of Luzon. Anyone who fell or straggled behind was shot. The Bataan Death March was one of the most brutal war crimes ever committed by the Japanese.

To this day it is remembered in the Philippines where April 9 is a national holiday, called the Day of Valor. The heroism, sacrifices and suffering are not forgotten.

Over the next two and a half years another 30,000 would die while in prison. But General MacArthur made good his promise and returned to liberate the Philippines. On one amazing day in January 1945, 121 U.S. Rangers emerged from the jungle and after a brief fight, liberated the prison and rescued the 513 remaining American and Allied survivors of the Bataan Death March.

Hampton Sides describes it this way in his book *Ghost Soldiers*:

“Slowly, the awareness that this was a jailbreak was beginning to sink in among the rest of the prisoners. They were reacting with a kind of catatonic ecstasy, numb and inarticulate. One prisoner wrapped his arms around the neck of the first Ranger he saw and kissed him on the forehead. All he could he say was "Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Oh, boy!" Alvie Robbins found one prisoner muttering in a darkened corner of one of the barracks, tears coursing down his face. "I thought we'd been forgotten," the prisoner said. "No, you're not forgotten," Robbins said. "We've come for you."..."I was glad it was dark so he couldn't see my tears," Tommie Thomas remembered years later. With the help of many heroic Filipinos, the liberated prisoners, sick, weak, frail, made their way back to the Allied lines. Finally they saw an American flag, the first Stars and Stripes he'd seen since the surrender three years earlier. "We wept openly, and we wept without shame" (Hampton Sides, *Ghost Soldiers*, pp. 238, 317).

I wonder if in all of human experience there is any experience quite as powerful, quite as joyful as being liberated from some bondage.

Who of us can come close to that kind of experience, the liberating joy of a great release from a great bondage?

A prisoner who has been let out of prison.

A hostage released from his captors.

A slave set free like in the movie 12 Years a Slave.

Someone in bondage to some sin or addiction, porn, alcohol, finally gaining victory.

Getting free from a great financial debt. Getting a diagnosis of being cancer free.

A child let free after being grounded.

Right after Jesus' temptation in the wilderness He went to Nazareth, His hometown and on the Sabbath went into the synagogue and read Isaiah 61 and preached from it.

In Isaiah's prophecy liberation and incredible joy go hand in hand: "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;... to comfort all who mourn;... the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit" (Isaiah 61:1-3).

After He preached, He astonished everyone there by saying, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Three years later, on this day, on the beginning of Holy Week on Palm Sunday, we remember another day of valor, another death march and the beginning of another great liberation.

While the crowds are singing and praising hosanna in the highest, Jesus is intentionally making His final death march, surrendering to enemy forces, submitting to horrific torture and injustice, yielding to sin and death. Jesus' march was truly a march to the war to end all wars, the cosmic battle against the spiritual forces of darkness, of sin, Satan and death.

This is that day, when Jesus begins fulfilling the prophecies of Zachariah and Isaiah. He wants us to know three things, which I take from three phrases in our text.

First, “The Mount of Olives.”

Our promised Messiah wants us to know He knows what He is doing. He has a plan and He has all things in control.

Zechariah prophesied: “On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, . . . Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. . . And the Lord will be king over all the earth” (Zech. 14:4, 5, 9).

This was the place. The exact place and the exact time. Exactly according to the prophecy of Zechariah 540 years before. This is the place from which the Jews believed the Messiah would come to liberate them. And He has come to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 700 years before.

The whole point and purpose of His coming was now at hand, when He would finish the mighty work He came to do. He has come to His final destination. He was about to break open the prison of sin and death and let the captives free. It would take a great battle with great suffering and sacrifice.

I hope it's clear to you that God knows what He is doing, He has a plan, He is always on time, He always has all things in control. He is always purposeful, intentional, resolute. Even down to the smallest of details, like a donkey and a colt.

Second, “The Lord needs them.”

Our promised Messiah wants us to know who He is.

That is one of the amazing sentences in the Bible. How would you define Jesus? The truth is any time you want to define Jesus you always have to use two words. You can't define Jesus with just one word. The modest Messiah, the common King, the lowly Lord, servant Savior, crucified Christ. God on a donkey. The God Man.

When we talk about Jesus we always have to say and think two things, “the Lord needs.” He is fully God, He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings; and He is fully man, fully human with our

needs, emotions, experiences, our flesh. He was poor and had to borrow a donkey. Deny either and the gospel is broken and the church is doomed. Affirm them both and the gospel is powerful and the church is on solid ground. He is one of us and He is able to help us.

Third, “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes.”

Our promised Messiah wants us to know He knows our needs, He has heard our prayers and He has answered.

Remember the two meanings of hosanna. The people are saying our salvation has come, our king has come to free us from the Romans. But Jesus knows the greater need and hears and answers the prayer, “Lord, save us.” That is exactly right. That is the prayer. The greatest need of all of humanity on all of the earth is to be set free from the bondage of sin and death. The greatest need of every person on this planet is to be saved.

Jesus doesn't answer their prayer the way they are praying it or thinking they need. He answers according to what they most need. Remember that when God doesn't answer your prayer. The people in Ukraine are praying for deliverance from Russia, and so are we. But their greatest need is deliverance from sin and unbelief, and that prayer is being answered big time as Christians and churches in Europe are ministering in the name of Jesus.

For three years Jesus has been on a voluntary march toward death. And He was now entering the city where He would be finally bound, tortured and killed. The city where He would fight the greatest enemy in the greatest battle and liberate all the prisoners, all those held in bondage.

Isn't it for freedom that we come to Jesus? We are weary of our long march, we are weak from the battle with sin, we are afraid of death, we are under threat of punishment, we can't keep up, we can't go on, our strength fails us, we get tired of trying to do everything on our own, people and life let us down. Isn't it for freedom that Jesus comes to us and we come to Jesus?

Isn't this what draws us? Isn't this why we lift our eyes to the hills, to the Mount of Olives, from which our help comes? (Psalm 121:1). Jesus has come to set us free.

We have sold ourselves into slavery to sin. We are in prison under a death sentence without parole. Christ breaks in and says He has come to satisfy our debt, that payment has been accepted by God. If we will surrender in faith to Him there will be no condemnation, no judgment against us. Jesus has come to set us free.

Do you know how much He loves to set people free? Do you know how much He loves you? He loves you so much He is willing to ride a donkey, and bear humiliation and shame and whips and thorns and curses and mocking and rejection and hate and torture and pain and death. He loves you and He loves to set prisoners free. He loves to break chains and shackles. He loves to break down barriers and walls. He loves to remove blinders and fetters. Jesus loves a good jail break.

Application and Conclusion:

On Palm Sunday Jesus is saying, “Yes, I am the Messiah King, just as the prophet says: ‘Behold your king.’ But, I am not coming on a white war-horse with a sword and a rod of iron. I am not coming to slay you or the Romans. I am coming to save you from a worse enemy.” Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of liberation. Today is the day the captives are released.

Colossians 1:13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This good news demands a response, two responses.

First, we are invited to see ourselves in a new way, as humble, poor, and in need of God’s gracious deliverance.

We must pray continually, “Hosanna.” Pray daily for the rule and reign of Christ. Pray daily “Thy kingdom come” in our own hearts and lives.

Take this message to heart. Jesus knows our greatest needs. We don’t need better circumstances, better jobs or spouses or bodies. We need new hearts, new spirits. Beauty and joy and freedom come from the inside and they trump everything else.

Take this message to heart; whatever your bondage is, Jesus has come to deliver you.

Jesus has come to release us from the captivity of illness, from fear or anxiety over it.
He has come to release us from guilt, over what you have done or how you have failed.
He has come to release you from the captivity of anger, over being wronged or offended.
He has come to release you from the prison of addiction or secret sin, porn or sinful desires.
He has come to set us free from the bondage of materialism, greed, lack of contentment.
He has come to release us from a broken heart, over the death of a loved one.
He has come to set us free from the bondage of uncertainty or fear of the future.
He has come to release us from the final fear, that final prison, fear of death itself.

Whether it is pride, lust, greed, gossip, envy, discontent, anxiety, selfishness, impatience, a critical spirit, lack of love, disbelief, whatever it is, cry out “Hosanna”, pray, “Lord, save me, deliver me,” and He will come.

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free:
From our fears and sins release us
Let us find our rest in thee.

Jesus came to minister to those in dire and dismal circumstances, afflicted, helpless, humble, meek, oppressed, beaten down by the world and sin and death.

If you think none of those things then you will yawn at Jesus' message and ministry. You will be bored, unimpressed. You will have no cause to worship and know the indescribable joy of true release from captivity and bondage and fear and hopelessness. If you are that way, you are blind to your true condition and need. Pray "Lord, save me from that blindness."

Second, we are invited to see our world (neighbors, outsiders, even enemies), in need of the same good news we have received. We are sent out like those Rangers who liberated souls from the prisoner of war camp.

Do you know someone in bondage to a sin or fear or unforgiveness or one of Satan's lies?

Can you imagine a greater joy than setting a prisoner free? In the spiritual realm it is the most loving, compassionate thing we can do. It's the most Christ-like thing we can do. The Spirit of the Lord is in us calling us and anointing us to pray and speak and work for the release of all who are captive.

The gospel is the good news of God's relentless desire to redeem us, set us free, and transform us into a community of grace-filled people for His glory. Joy comes when we see ourselves in light of this story as humble, poor, and needy. Joy abounds when we see others, as fellow recipients of the goodness and mercy of God. Palm Sunday invites us to imagine life under the reign of God, where everything is grace, and Palm Sunday invites us to share that grace.

Today is truly a Day of Valor when Jesus marched to death for us to liberate us from our own march toward death and then to make us ambassadors of that good news as we consider Christ and what He has done and what He enables us to do.

And we do all this in the joy of Jesus' final promise, "I will return." What liberation that will be.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for not forgetting about us. Thank you for coming at just the right time and to just the right place to rescue us, to deliver us, to set us free. Thank you for being our perfect Savior, exactly what we need.

Today we sing Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest. We rejoice both in what you suffered for us and we rejoice in the victory you gained for us. In the light of both, help us to endure our hardships in a way that glorifies the Father and accomplishes great good for us and those around us. Strengthen our faith, increase our hope, deepen our love, embolden our courage, fill us with your Spirit that we may imitate Christ, in whose name alone we pray. Amen.