

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 24, 2024

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## Ready or not...

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Ready or not,” this is a phrase I find myself using a lot in the weeks before Holy Week in the church. Church staff spend a great deal of time in the lead up to Holy Week trying to prepare, trying to get ready. I cannot speak for all clergy, but for myself, there’s a lot of self-applied pressure to communicate this powerful narrative of God’s great love and grace in the best way possible. This narrative, these chapters of scripture, describing the last days of Jesus, contain the heart of the Gospel...the good news of God’s salvific action in Jesus Christ. Well, ready or not, Holy Week begins today!

Jesus said much the same thing to his disciples several times in the chapters leading up to the text appointed for today. Half a chapter before the Triumphal entry we read this: “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.’”<sup>1</sup> Ready or not disciples, here’s what’s coming!

And those disciples were **not** ready, not in the slightest! What do James and John do in response to Christ’s warning? They ask to join Jesus in his glory. Proving conclusively that they didn’t understand what Jesus was telling them, that they were not ready for any glory, let alone God’s. But nevertheless, Jesus says to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with.”<sup>2</sup> Ready or not, James and John, you’re going to experience what Christ will. But at least they will have Christ’s example by the time of their martyrdoms.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:32-34 (NRSVue)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:39c

How about those crowds that greeted Jesus outside of Jerusalem? Were they ready for what was coming? Knowing the whole story of course, we understand that they weren't either. It seems the crowds were ready for a few different things. Some were ready for a parade, a celebration. An extra something right before the start of Passover. Others in the crowd were probably ready for healing or exorcism from Jesus, or some other display of divine power. And yet others in the crowd...they were ready for revolution. Ready to follow a new king in rebellion against the might of Rome. But I suspect most in the crowds weren't ready for much of anything at all. Simply carried along the thoroughfares of Jerusalem by the press of people.

Perhaps there was one in the crowd who had a bit of an inkling though. At the end of chapter 10 we're told that Jesus has a new follower, a man named Bartimaeus whom Jesus restored sight to. It's reasonable to conclude that Bartimaeus is among the witnesses of this entry. And, I would argue, it's reasonable to conclude that he, perhaps alone in the crowd of followers, is the most ready for what's to come. But I'll come back to him in a bit.

What about Jesus? Was he ready for what was going to happen in Jerusalem? We are only three chapters away from hearing Jesus in the garden say to his disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,"<sup>3</sup> and then pray to God, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me."<sup>4</sup> I cannot imagine facing what Christ was facing.

Knowing that the followers you've collected, people who have dedicated years of their lives to you...will all abandon you. Your closest companion will even deny knowing you altogether! Then the Law, that good and necessary gift from God, will be twisted and broken to falsely accuse you of heresy and condemn you to death. You will be publicly humiliated and tortured, cruelly crucified and your body on display as a warning to others that dare disturb the *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome). But worst of all, in the midst of all this suffering and pain you will be cut off from the source...from God. In that moment the words will be wrenched from you...words of utter despair and anguish..."My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>5</sup>

Was Jesus ready for all of this? If anyone could have been, it was God's only Son! In the face of everything...in the face of the question, "ready or not?" Jesus responds with faith. Ready or not? Doesn't matter...God's will be done. Jesus places his trust in the eternal and abundant love and grace of God. This almost makes the question of ready or not a moot one. When we rest in God. When we trust in God's love and

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 14:34a

<sup>4</sup> Mark 14:36

<sup>5</sup> Mark 15:34c

grace. When we know the source of life, it's no longer a question of ready or not...God's always ready, and we can trust that.

Back to Bartimaeus. Why do I think he, perhaps alone in the crowds, might have been more ready than the rest? More ready than James and John, and Peter certainly? Because of how he got healed. Jesus was in Jericho, making his way to Jerusalem when this blind beggar hears him coming. And clearly Bartimaeus was ready for his arrival! When he hears him approaching, he yells out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>6</sup> And when others shush him, what does he do? Yells all the louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>7</sup>

Bartimaeus was calling on Christ to be Christ, on God to be God. The promised Messiah, the son of David, was supposed to bring restoration and healing after all. Bartimaeus was saying to Jesus, I'm not ready, I can never be ready, I am trapped in darkness, and I want to be free! Save me! Set me free! I believe you can liberate me! Be the living Word, be the Good News for me! Let God's healing and restorative will be done!

Now certainly Bartimaeus wasn't ready for what would come in the next few days. But he entered into it with an experience of God's grace that could have readied him for those days, at least a bit more than most. And ultimately that is what will carry us through this life too, God's grace. So, are we ready for Holy Week? No, we're not. But we don't need to be!

This is a fundamental piece of our Incarnational theology. Jesus, God's only Son, the Word made flesh, takes on human form and limitation; the divine enters into the mundane. Why? To prove, conclusively, that God is with us. To illustrate that no matter what we endure in this life, we never endure it alone. To show us that we don't have to be ready when it comes to salvation, when it comes to facing evil and death. We don't have to be ready because God always is. All we need do is recognize the source of life and grace and cry out, "Your will be done!"

We enter into this Holy Week acknowledging our own limitations. Admitting that we're not ready, and we'll never be ready. We enter into the Passion of Christ trying to follow his example of faith and trust. We would do well to spend this Holy Week praying, again and again, "Your will be done." Your will for peace be done. Your will for justice be done. Your will for inclusion and wholeness be done. Your will for healing and restoration be done. Your will for love and life be done. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:47b

<sup>7</sup> Mark 10:48b