

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*April 13, 2025*

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## Preparing

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

Today, we stand at the threshold of Holy Week, that most sacred time in the life of the Church. We've journeyed through Lent, these forty days of reflection, repentance, and renewal. We've examined our lives, our shortcomings, our need for God's grace. We've perhaps given up something, not as a test of our will power, but as a reminder of our dependence on God. We've engaged in spiritual practices, not to earn God's favor, but to open our hearts to the transforming love of our Creator. And now, we arrive at this pivotal moment, this day of paradox and profound meaning: Palm Sunday.

Our Gospel reading today, from Luke 19:28-40, invites us to enter into the drama of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. It's a scene filled with contrasts, a moment of triumph and tragedy, a glimpse of glory and a shadow of the cross. It's a story that speaks to us across the centuries, calling us to prepare our hearts and minds for the week that lies ahead.

Imagine it: Jerusalem, the holy city, is teeming with pilgrims. Passover, the great feast of liberation, is about to begin. The air is thick with anticipation. And then, he comes. Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, approaches the city. But not in the way anyone expected.

He doesn't ride a warhorse, a symbol of power and conquest. He doesn't lead a mighty army, a sign of earthly authority. No, he comes on a colt, a young donkey, an animal of peace and humility. It's a deliberate choice, a powerful statement. Jesus is not the kind of king the world expects. He's not about domination, but about service. He's not about force, but about love.

And the crowds, they respond with a fervor that's almost bewildering. They spread their cloaks on the road, a gesture of royal welcome. They wave palm branches, symbols of victory and triumph. They shout "Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!"

Their excitement is palpable. Their hopes are soaring. Could this be the moment they've been waiting for? Could this be the one who will finally liberate them from Roman oppression? Could this be the dawn of a new era? But even in this moment of celebration, there are discordant notes. Luke tells us that some Pharisees in the crowd are uneasy. They tell Jesus to rebuke his disciples, to silence their enthusiastic praise. But Jesus refuses. He says, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

It's a remarkable statement. It speaks of the unstoppable nature of God's truth. It suggests that even the inanimate creation longs for the coming of the King. It hints at the cosmic significance of this moment.

This entry into Jerusalem is a revelation of God's upside-down kingdom. It's a kingdom where the first are last, and the last are first. It's a kingdom where the greatest among you must be the servant of all. It's a kingdom where power is made perfect in weakness. Jesus is redefining everything. He's challenging our assumptions about power, about success, about what it means to be great. He's inviting us to embrace a different way, a way of humility, a way of service, a way of love.

And this, my friends, is what lies at the heart of Holy Week. It's not just a week of remembering, a passion play of past events. It's a week of transformation, a journey into the very heart of God's love for us. It's a week that begins with shouts of "Hosanna!" and ends with cries of "Crucify Him!" It's a week that takes us from the triumph of the entry to the agony of the

cross. It's a week that reveals the depths of human betrayal and the heights of divine forgiveness.

Even as the crowds celebrate, Jesus knows what lies ahead. He knows that this moment of glory will soon give way to suffering and death. He knows that the very people who are now praising him will soon turn against him. Luke's Gospel subtly foreshadows this tragedy. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, he weeps over the city saying, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes."<sup>1</sup> His tears are a sign of deep love for the people. They're a lament over their blindness, their inability to see the true meaning of his coming.

And as Jesus enters the city, he goes to the temple, the center of Jewish life and worship. But instead of being welcomed as the Messiah, he's met with opposition. He drives out those who are buying and selling, those who have turned his Father's house into a marketplace. It's a powerful act of cleansing, a prophetic challenge to the religious establishment. It's a reminder that true worship is not about external rituals or financial transactions, but about walking the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross.

Holy Week is an invitation to the work necessary to walk the Way. It's an invitation to walk with Jesus on the road to the cross. It's an invitation to enter into the mystery of God's love. It's an invitation to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's an invitation to slow down, to be still, to listen. To listen to the whispers of God's grace in the midst of the chaos and noise of our lives. To listen to the cries of the suffering and the marginalized. To listen to the voice of our own hearts, our own longings, our own need for God. It's an invitation to repent, to turn away from our sin and turn towards God. To confess our

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 19:41b-42 (NRSVUE)

failures, our shortcomings, our betrayals. To be rebuked for our proclivity towards violence. To seek forgiveness and healing.

It's an invitation to serve, to love, to give ourselves away. To follow in the footsteps of the One who came not to be served but to serve. To reach out to the poor, the lonely, the forgotten. To be instruments of God's peace and reconciliation in a broken world.

And finally, my friends, Holy Week is an invitation to hope. Because beyond the suffering and the death, beyond the darkness of Good Friday, lies the promise of Easter. The empty tomb. The risen Lord. The victory of life over death. The vindication of God's love. This is the ultimate truth of our faith. This is the good news that sustains us in our darkest hours.

Even in the midst of our own pain, our own struggles, our own losses, we can trust that God is with us. Even when we feel abandoned and alone, we can cling to the hope that God's love will prevail. Easter is not just a happy ending to a sad story. It's not just a reversal of fortunes. It's a new creation, a new beginning, a new possibility for all of us. It's the assurance that death does not have the final word, that love is stronger than hate, that life is more powerful than death.

So, as we enter into this Holy Week, let us do so with open hearts and open minds. Let us not be afraid to confront the difficult truths about ourselves and about the world. Let us not shy away from the pain and the suffering. But let us also not lose sight of the hope that lies beyond the cross. Let us listen to God's Word. Let us walk with Jesus on the Way.

And may this Holy Week be for us a time of deep transformation, a time of profound encounter with the living God, a time of renewed commitment to the way of love, the way of the cross, the way of life. Amen.