

WHAT YOU SIGNED UP FOR Matthew 21:1-11

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on April 5, 2020, Palm Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia. This was the fourth Sunday of a closing for the Coronavirus pandemic and was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

I.

Several years ago, at a Maundy Thursday service, as I was walking up the center aisle in the darkened sanctuary following the service, I noticed one of our members standing in front of the chancel, staring at the elements of communion recently distributed, softly crying.

I assumed she was tearful because the service had moved her to remember a recent grief: the loss of a parent, a grandparent, perhaps a good friend or sibling. I stood beside her and placed my hand on her shoulder. Before I could say anything, she said: “He went through so much. So much.”

It took me a few seconds to realize that whatever she had experienced in the service had led her to a deeply felt grief *not* over the loss of a loved one but over the *suffering* and *death* of Christ. “He went through so much for us,” she said. In a rush of sudden wisdom, I did not attempt to add any words to the poignant truth she had expressed.

“Christ did go through so much.” His was not a death due to illness or accident, to heart attack or stroke, to addiction or natural disaster. At some point in his young life – for even then, the early thirties were young – he *became aware* that *his death would come* and that it would be at the hands not of nature *but* of the human race he had come to redeem.

When we read the Gospels, we cannot tell *exactly* when Christ came into that knowledge:

- Perhaps it was as early as the angel music he heard upon awakening from his birth¹

¹ Luke 2:8-14.

- Perhaps it was when his parents passed him into the rickety arms of Simeon in the Temple and he noticed his mother lower her eyes when the ancient man spoke of “sword piercing [her] soul”²
- Perhaps it came around age twelve when his studies led him to teach elders in the Temple³
- Perhaps the sense that he would die came when he heard John the Baptist single him out as “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”⁴
- Perhaps it came when he heard the voice of God at his baptism⁵ or that same voice at his transfiguration⁶
- Perhaps it came in the silence which met his poignant cry in the Garden of Gethsemane – “Let this cup pass from me...”⁷
- In the kiss planted on his cheek by the one named Judas⁸
- In his instructions to his disciples to secure a donkey and colt immediately⁹ for his ride to Jerusalem
- Perhaps he knew he would soon meet death when he heard the crowds that greeted him with “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”¹⁰ morph a few days later into even louder shouting “Let him be crucified!”¹¹
- Perhaps Christ knew death was around the corner when he heard the half-cynical, half-philosophical question from Pilate, “What is truth?”¹²
- Or perhaps it was the silence which met his final plea “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”¹³

No matter how many times we read the Bible – and the commentaries written by people who make their living reading the Bible – we cannot tell, *exactly*, when Jesus *knew* he would die. But we come away convinced that at some point he *expected* it, he *predicted* it, he *interpreted* it, and he *embraced* it. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” he said, “it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”¹⁴

At some point, the man Jesus, the Messiah Christ, *knew* that death by crucifixion was his destiny. He knew it is what he had been *sent* to do and it became what he *signed up* to do.

“He went through so much,” the parishioner said. “So much.”

² Luke 2:25-35

³ Luke 2:41-52.

⁴ John 1:29-34.

⁵ Luke 3:21-23.

⁶ Luke 9:28-36

⁷ Luke 22:39-46.

⁸ Mark 14:45.

⁹ Matthew 21:2.

¹⁰ Matthew 21:9.

¹¹ Matthew 27:15-23,

¹² John 18:18.

¹³ Matthew 27:46.

¹⁴ John 12:24.

II.

There are many questions that the continuous sweep of a pandemic that goes by the technical name COVID-19 and the colloquial name Coronavirus has raised for us the past few weeks.

- Is it really a threat?
- Could it really hit someone I know?
- Could it really hit me?
- Is it going to be over soon?
- What will its impact be on my work and my school?
- How did *we* get here, *it* get here?
- Did somebody drop the ball?

There are also theological questions, many of which arise in every time of threat and disaster:

- Why does God allow such things to happen?
- If God is “all-good” does he lack the *power* to stop the spread?
- Or if God “all-powerful,” does he lack the *love* to stop it?
- Why are bad things happening to good people?
 - My sister?
 - My aunt?
 - My father
- When will this end and we all be safe again?

There are also basic human questions that arise:

- When can I go back to work?
- When can I go back to school?
- When can we go back to worshipping in the Sanctuary?
- When will baseball return?
- When can the kids go back to learning the way they used to learn?
- When can I see my dad in the retirement center?
- When can I see my grandchild?
- Why can't I hug you, Grandma?

For all these questions – theological and human – some will *soon* have answers, some will have answers *in time*, and some will *never* have answers.

III.

But there is one thing with which we are left. One thing that can never be taken from us or our compatriots. That one thing is *witness*. The *witness* of our fellow human beings.

I was sent an email in response to an outreach I made to one of our member families earlier this week. It said this:

Thanks for the email checking in on us. We are doing well so far. [My wife] is working like normal with the added threat of the virus. My tasking is to remain mission capable, so they've got us going

into the office only one day per week to limit our contact with co-workers. The [children] are doing just fine too.

[My wife's] sense is that "there's a storm coming" and she can't run from it. We'll see how the next few weeks go. Unfortunately, she's likely to get the virus [from her patients] and then spread it at home.

Again, thanks for checking on us.

Later that day I was telling my wife Maggie about the email and the family involved, and we both marveled – once again – at the sheer *courage* that people in public service, health care providers, military and first responders display at the front lines of danger, at times of national crisis. Then we said, almost at the same time: "It's what you sign up for."

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Unlike a lot of people who are probably wiser, we keep the television on the cable news networks, most of the day, in several rooms, often playing in the background. We always turn the sound off for meals, and when evening comes, we turn it off for the night, though we check our phones before going to sleep.

The morning after I told her about the email, I saw a CNN broadcast of the death from the virus of Dr. James T. Goodrich, the pediatric neurosurgeon who conducted a remarkable operation in 2016 to separate Jadon and Anias McDonald, thirteen-month-old boys who were fused at the brain and skull. Goodrich led a team of 40 doctors in a 27-hour surgery at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx which was successful, giving each boy a life, they still have four years later.

I had been vaguely familiar with that surgery from the publicity it had received at the time, but was not familiar with the doctor. Watching news of his death and highlights of his life as the sun came up, I was moved to tears. The doctor was in his seventies. He and his wife – now his widow – had no children. The children on whom he operated for decades were his children.

It is what he had signed up to do.

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Another email from a woman in the church:

Hi Larry.

Thanks for checking in. We are doing well with [my husband] working from home and me staying out of the way. So far, so good!

I have responded to the call for all retired medical providers to volunteer in NY. I'm not sure that they need [my specialty], but we'll see what happens. It's been a while since I ran a ventilator. I called my previous practice in Upstate NY, and they are actually less busy given that they want to keep people home as much as possible. We are ever mindful that this disaster is an opportunity for our adversaries to exploit the US, and we all (especially [my husband] and all DOD personnel) need to be vigilant.

We are concerned about our family members. Our son...and his girlfriend...are both residents at Emory in Atlanta and are on the front lines. [Another son's] wife...is in her third trimester of pregnancy out in Palo Alto. She is a [Nurse Practitioner] in women's health, but she is taking phone calls rather than seeing patients. Then son #3...is in Greenwich, CT which is much too close to Westchester County! He and his fiancée are wondering whether they need to postpone their wedding which is scheduled...on July 18th. That leaves son #4...who is safe and sound up in Rome, NY, not a worry! [My husband's] father will turn 90 on April 1st. We will be in touch if not present. Anyway, we feel safe and healthy and are available if the church needs us for anything....

Being ready, with the risks it entails, is what two generations in this family have signed up to do.

IV.

The church will always struggle with answers to the theological questions that a pandemic like this raise. We will think, pray, meditate, search the scriptures, consult with thinkers from centuries past. And we will likely come to the same conclusion: A reminder of our vulnerability as humans; a reminder that the fate of individuals and indeed the fate of civilization and nature are ultimately in God's hands; a reminder that neither we – nor any religious tradition – can fully explain why this is happening to so many people who are suffering and threatened. We don't have the intellectual answers.

But one thing we do have is *witness*: the *witness* of others around us, who in ways *approaching* what Jesus did, do what they signed up to do.

I am not sure Jesus fully knew what he had signed up for until the time came. Nor often do we fully realize what we have signed up for. But in our *signing up* and in our *living up* to our *signing up*, we come closer to the “so much” that Jesus went through the final week of his life, the “so much” that moved the parishioner standing in front of the Communion Table on that Maundy Thursday a few years ago.

Those of us who witness such *signings up* and such *fulfillments* come to know *who Jesus is* and *what he did* a bit better through the witness of others, witness which is in no short supply these days, witness in whose paths we follow as we may be called to sign up as well.

Amen.