

April 2, 2023  
Palm Sunday  
Matthew 21:1-11; 27:11-54

Palm Sunday  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “The Opportune Time Has Come”

“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross”

The temptations of Jesus did not end in the wilderness.

In all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus’ baptism is followed by a forty-day ordeal in the wilderness in which he is tempted by the devil to use his divine powers for purposes other than that for which God intends them to be used for the redemption of God’s people. Three times the devil tempts our Lord, and three times Jesus resists temptation, so that we might have the assurance that *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:15). All three Gospels report that after Jesus successfully resists the devil’s temptations, Satan leaves him, and *“angels came and waited on him.”* (Matthew 4:11). But at the end of his account of the temptation, Luke adds a note of warning: *“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”* (Luke 4:13). This “opportune time” can also mean “fixed time” or “critical time.” It warns of a second diabolic onslaught against God’s plan of salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The devil departs from Jesus “for a little while,” to return through the Gospels with new attacks that seek to derail our Lord from fulfilling his mission of being the Saviour of God’s people through his death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

These temptations came in many different forms and from many different sources, often from people who did not understand that they were doing the devil’s work in seeking to tempt Jesus away from the path upon which God had called him. One of these temptations happens when Jesus asks his disciples *“who do you say that I am?”* to which Peter replies *“you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:15-16). While Jesus praises Peter for this bold confession of faith and announces that he will be the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, the atmosphere changes radically when Jesus announces that *“he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”* (16:21). But this greatly troubles Peter, since in his mind the Messiah should be the mighty warrior-king who will defeat the Romans and restore Israel to its proper place among the nations – not one

who will die such a disgraceful death at the hands of the enemy. So Peter takes it upon himself to take Jesus aside and rebuke him: “*God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!*” (16:22). But having resisted temptation in the wilderness, Jesus recognizes what is happening; so he turns to Peter and says “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*” (16:23).

Jesus finds himself in another situation of temptation when after his feeding of the Five Thousand the crowds “*were about to take him by force to make him king*” (John 6:15). One of the devil’s three temptations in the wilderness was the temptation to absolute power: “*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’*” (Matthew 4:11). But once again, Jesus recognizes the crowd’s desire as another temptation; so when he realizes what they are about to do, “*he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*” (John 6:15).

While Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is one of the best-known and most beloved stories in the Gospels, there are also undertones of temptations that could have enticed Jesus away from the reason he enters the Holy City on this day. Up to this point in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has been careful in public settings to keep his messianic identity quiet (“*Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*” – 16:20). That secrecy ends when he enters Jerusalem with the crowds spreading their garments on the ground before him like a royal carpet (“*Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, ‘Jehu is king.’*” – 2 Kings 9:13), and praising him as the royal Son of David. The Mount of Olives was also associated with messianic expectations (“*On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives ...*” – Zechariah 14:4); the donkey upon which Jesus rides also recalls such expectations (“*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*” – Zechariah 9:9). “*By riding into Jerusalem on an ass, he boldly proclaims – without saying a word – that he is the messiah Jerusalem has been waiting for!*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). At the same time, by drawing attention to this prophecy, Jesus indicates that his kingship will be different from popular messianic expectations. According to Zechariah, the king entering Jerusalem will be “meek” and “on a donkey,” not with a horse, chariot, or bow for battle. The king will bring peace, not war (“*he shall command peace to the nations*” – 9:10). These allusions to the prophecies of

Zechariah “*are meant to counter the nationalistic and revolutionary tendencies associated with popular messianic hopes*” (Mitch and Sri).

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowds immediately begin honouring him as a king. The branches laid before him recall the psalms in which the people of Israel called out to the Lord for a king who would save them from the hands of their enemies:

- “Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.”  
– Psalm 118:25-27.

The cries of “Hosanna!” are a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning “save us!” The crowds hail Jesus as the one they believe is coming in the Lord’s name, who will accomplish what they expect of the Messiah: the mighty warrior who will rescue God’s people from the hands of the Roman enemy and restore Israel to the grandeur that it enjoyed under David and Solomon. As he hears the cries of the crowd and is enveloped by this royal welcome, it would have been easy for Jesus to be tempted to give in to their cries and expectations and become the messiah that they desired. But once again, our Lord resists this temptation to power and giving in to the expectations of people, for his mission is to accomplish the will of the one who sent him; for “*though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited; but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” (Philippians 2:6-8). The welcome of the crowd on Palm Sunday is another form of temptation, and when the crowds realize that Jesus has resisted their cries and will not fulfill what they desire, they will turn on him and become the same voices calling for this crucifixion.

Within a matter of days, Jesus is betrayed by Judas, arrested and brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. As he stands before the representative of the power and cruelty of the Empire, Pilate asks Jesus a question that is clearly a political charge: “*Are you the king of the Jews?*” (Matthew 27:11). Treason or rebellion against Rome was a capital offense punishable by crucifixion. Jesus’ responses are his only words spoken in Matthew during the Roman trial: “*You say so.*” He refuses to respond to the accusations leveled against him by the religious authorities; Pilate goes so far as to ask Jesus “*do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?*” (27:13). But when Jesus “*gave him no answer, not even*

to a single charge ... the governor was greatly amazed” (27:14); but while Pilate may have been amazed, those who knew the words of Isaiah would recognize that Jesus is the fulfillment of the words of the prophet concerning the Suffering Servant:

- “Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals – so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate ... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” – Isaiah 52:14-15, 53:7.

Pilate realizes that Jesus is innocent of the charges that have been laid against him seeks to release him by giving the crowds a choice between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas, a notorious prisoner. But to his surprise and shock, the crowd cries out for him to release Barabbas and have Jesus crucified; *“the choice is between two men named Jesus: Jesus the criminal and Jesus the Messiah. Once again, two kingdoms stand over against each other.”* (M. Eugene Boring). Pilate attempts to absolve himself of guilt by washing his hands and declaring his innocence: *“I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves”* (27:24). But even though the crowds accept responsibility, in the end it is only the Roman governor who has the power to order a crucifixion: *“So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.”* (27:26). The Roman trial ends with the Gentiles mocking Jesus as “King”; their mocking is preceded by flogging, a severe beating that was often fatal (*“The crowds joined in attacking [Paul and Silas], and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods.”* – Acts 16:22). Jesus is mocked and greeted by being spat upon and struck; *“in contrast to the universal practice of kingship in this world, the true king receives violence rather than inflicting it.”* (Boring).

As further humiliation, the condemned prisoner was usually forced to carry the heavy crossbar upon which they would be crucified themselves. For reasons that are not explained, *“they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross”* (27:32). In Matthew, the only person present with Jesus at Golgotha whose name we know is an outsider; *“that a man named Simon is forced to carry Jesus’ cross emphasizes the abandonment of Jesus by his own disciples, especially the one named Simon”* (Boring). Jesus is crucified at Golgotha, the “Place of a Skull” that was a public place for crucifixions located on a busy public thoroughfare. Jesus is offered wine mixed with gall, a narcotic used to ease the pain

of the condemned (“*They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink*” – Psalm 69:21), but Jesus refuses it. As Jesus is crucified, the soldiers cast lots to divide his clothing (“*they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots*” – Psalm 22:18). The sign placed over Jesus’ head is intended as a coarse joke, but Matthew transforms the insult into a Christian confession that even the executioners will acknowledge before the scene is over: “*This is Jesus, the King of the Jews*” (27:37). The two persons crucified with Jesus are identified as “bandits,” thus increasing the humiliation.

As Jesus suffers on the Cross, the “opportune time” of the devil’s last temptation arrives in the form of the crowd who “derided him” (27:39); their “deriding” (*blasphemeo*, “blasphemy”) taunts Jesus with his own words: “*You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*” (27:39-40). Their challenge to “come down from the cross” is the temptation for Jesus to end his suffering, to reject God’s Will in suffering and dying for the sake of humanity, and living a long and fruitful life instead of dying at such a young age in such a humiliating fashion. The taunts of the crowd are joined by the mocking of the religious authorities who also tempt Jesus to come down from the cross:

- “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” – 27:42-43.

The bandits who are being crucified with him join in the chorus of taunting and temptation; there is no repentant thief in Matthew. “*Jesus suffers among criminals, with no friend, relative, disciple, or convert present.*” (Boring).

Giving the unbearable pain he is suffering, taunted by voices around him tempting him to come down from the cross, abandoned by even his closest followers, it would be understandable for Jesus to give into this last temptation and end his suffering. But as Jesus had resisted all previous temptations of the devil, once again our Lord resists and triumphs over Satan so that he might be the one through whom we are freed from “*sin, death, and the power of the devil*” (*Small Catechism*). As darkness covers the whole land from noon until 3:00 pm, Jesus cries out in his native tongue with a loud voice, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” – “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (27:46). It is the cry of one suffering a truly human death, crying out in pain and despair, abandoned by all and despairing that even God has forsaken him. But Jesus’ words from Psalm 22 also cry out in the words of lament that are

spoken in the context of faith that believes that the cries of despair are heard by God, the Lord who will “*deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion!*” (Psalm 22:20-21). Jesus cries out knowing that even in the final moments of his earthly life he has accomplished God’s Will; he has triumphed over the forces of the devil and the chorus of satanic voices tempting him to abandon his mission as Saviour of God’s people. Jesus triumphs over sin, death, and the power of the devil “*not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” (Small Catechism). Even in his hour of greatest weakness and vulnerability, Jesus overcomes the temptations of the devil so that all who are baptized into his death and resurrection “*may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.*” (Luther).

- “It sounds for all the world like the end of faith. Instead, it is the beginning. This Jesus died talking to his Abba, who would not talk back to him. Is there any other definition of faith? In his suffering, he is the comfort of those who have no comfort. In his abandonment, he is the God of those who have no God. Hearing no voice of love, he cried out, making a sound that – for many – became the voice of love.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The temptations did not end for Jesus in the wilderness; they followed him throughout his life until the moment when he “*cried out again with a loud voice and breathed his last.*” (27:50). But while it may have appeared that the forces of darkness triumphed at Golgotha on Good Friday, we know that through his death Jesus destroyed the power of death, the forces of darkness that seek to separate people from the loving presence of God. Our Lord accomplishes God’s mission on the Cross, so that we may live in the assurance that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Because Jesus experienced every form of human weakness and temptation that we experience, we can “*therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” (Hebrews 4:16). We will experience similar temptations that our Lord endured throughout his life; but because “*Jesus knows our every weakness,*” we know that we can triumph over the forces of evil and temptation when we turn to our source of life and salvation, the one who triumphed over temptation so that we might live in the comfort of a holy and certain hope in the one who will “*save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.*” In our hour of trial and temptation, we “*should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer!*”

Amen.