Embracing the Vision
Matthew 21: 1-17
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From the Mount of Olives, down to the Kidron Valley, and then up again to the southern gate Jesus processed with this disciples. Soon the crowded streets of Holy Jerusalem—overflowing with people in town for Passover—get caught up in the disciples’ praise. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” They spread out their cloaks on the road, others cut branches from the trees—maybe palm branches (Matthew doesn’t say). It’s their way to mark the royal way for a royal son who comes in the name of God, to the city of God – the navel, the axis of the world. The city is already full and frenetic. The Roman legions, based in Caesarea Maritima, were transferred from their garrisons along the coast here to ensure that everything remained peaceful. Jerusalem during Passover was a powder keg, just waiting to explode with religious and political zealotry against the Roman occupation. Adding to the turmoil and increasing the tension, Jesus and his followers organize a demonstration, a spectacle on a donkey, religious, political theatre, all designed to make a point.

And what’s the point? As we hear this story, which we probably know well, maybe too well, I think it’s important to wonder if Jesus, entering Jerusalem that day really knew what the rest of the week would be like. From our vantage point, knowing about Good Friday and Easter morning, it looks as if the reason Jesus was heading to Jerusalem was to die on a cross, as if that was the plan all along – to die on a cross. We have come to believe it’s all about the cross and the empty tomb—and it is, but not exclusively so. We have come to believe it was about Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, taking our sins upon himself and offering in exchange forgiveness and new life—and it is, but not exclusively so, at least not for Matthew. You would be hard-pressed to find these understandings of the cross in his gospel. In fact, we generally focus so much upon the cross and the empty-tomb that we believe that’s what it’s all about—and it is, but not completely.

What I’m trying to say is that the cross and the empty tomb cannot be severed from the rest of Jesus’ life, from his ministry, from his teaching. The cross and the Easter message make no sense apart from what transpired from the moment of Jesus’ birth right up to the day before he rode into Jerusalem. In fact, I’m beginning to wonder and maybe even believe that Jesus wasn’t born to die on a cross. I’m beginning to wonder and maybe even believe that Jesus wasn’t born to atone for my sin, to die for me, “to bear the dreaded curse for my soul.” At least not in the conventional way we think about these claims. These are some of the ways the church attempted to make sense of what they experienced, crafted post-resurrection, after we’ve had time—about 2000 years or so and still counting—to reflect upon that fateful week.

What am I getting at? Where was Jesus going on that Palm Sunday? What was his destination? If it was to a cross, that could have occurred any where. Why Jerusalem?
Jerusalem was not the exclusive crucifixion zone for the Roman Empire. Instead, maybe Jerusalem was the destination and not the cross, but to the Temple Mount—the holy temple of Yahweh. That’s where he was going. He went right to the heart of the religious establishment—the site where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, the resting place for the ark of the covenant, the home of the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of the holiness of God, the setting of Solomon’s temple and then the site for the second temple. And this was no ordinary temple—it was enormous, one of the wonders of the ancient world, it was covered with gold and reflected the sun with a brilliance, symbolizing a God of “light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” It was the center of the religious life, the economic life, and the political life of Israel, staffed by scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees and other religious officials who were all in collaboration with the Roman Empire. That’s one of the reasons why there were money-changers in the temple—where they shouldn’t have been. Money with the image—the graven images of Caesar—on it in the very home of a God who has gone on record, in stone, about how he feels about graven images; money with the image of a Caesar who claimed and demanded worship like a god. That’s where Jesus was heading—to the nerve-center of the collaborators, to dismantle and undo the system. His goal: to take on the abuses of religion that get in the way of authentic worship and service to a God who alone is worthy of worship and service and even our lives. That was Jesus’ goal on the last week of his ministry; that was his mission on the first week of his ministry. That was the message behind the parables and all the preaching about the kingdom—or we can even say, the empire—of God (same word in Greek).

Jesus was thoroughly committed to his calling, thoroughly faithful to God, and to the kingdom. Because the kingdom is the pearl of great price, he gives anything, even his life, in order to buy the field where that pearl is buried. What mattered most to Jesus was the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace and righteousness, a realm of salvation and mercy and love. Because these mattered most to Jesus—and because the religious authorities were perverting the message and standing in the way of justice and peace—Jesus takes on the entire system. Because this is what mattered most to Jesus he was willing to give and even sacrifice his life.

As we enter Holy Week, perhaps we can then think of the cross in this way: to see the cross as the consequence of Jesus’ faithfulness to the kingdom of God, the result of Jesus being faithful to God’s vision for his life, which he first discovered in the wilderness of Judea. Jesus’ vision wasn’t shared by many of his contemporaries, particularly the religious authorities and certainly the political authorities. In fact, they were intentionally against it. It’s been said that limited or even false-visions have a way of creating crosses for people. This is not to say that Jesus’ vision was wrong, but that when people are short-sighted, can’t envision another way, think their way is the only way, can’t admit their limitations, resist the way of love and justice, then people suffer and get hurt. That’s one way of seeing what happened to Jesus; it still happens today, sometimes even in Jesus’ name. When the church and its people have limited or false-visions of what the church is supposed to be about, people get hurt, people suffer, and we crucify God’s children again and again.

When the vision of God is put first, as we see in Jesus, when we get our priorities straight, when we are willing to give our lives for it, suffer for it, and maybe—for some—even die for it, then God will justify such a life, God will resurrect such a life, God will raise up and
redeem, honor and bless such a life—as God did with Jesus. In other words, focusing on God’s vision, what God desires for all God’s people, and then aligning ourselves with the vision—embracing it—is crucial because it’s the royal way that leads to life. I beginning to believe this a significant dimension of what’s going on throughout Holy Week and a part of the Easter message.

It just so happens to be similar to the focus of our new capital campaign, **Embracing the Vision**, which we kick-off today. We’ve used this word “vision” a lot lately—and we’re going to hear a lot more of it over the next six weeks! It’s crucial. All analogies and metaphors are inadequate, as we know. I’m not equating our plans for this campaign with the purpose of Jesus’ life. I’m not saying that **Embracing the Vision** will cost us our lives; hopefully it will cost us something, however. It will cost us something if we consider what the vision of this church is worth. Because the visions matters, the cost will be worth it.

**Embracing the Vision** campaign, as we know, is primarily about retiring, vanquishing the debt occurred from the last campaign which collected funds to support a long-overdue renovation of our church facility. In order to do what was needed then we had to incur good debt—just as we might have good debt for a home mortgage or for student loans, that’s good debt. But very soon for us (July, actually) the good debt will become bad debt, bad debt that will hinder our ability to live into the future God has planned for this people of God. The vision part of the campaign slogan is not retiring the debt. The vision is the health and strength and direction of the **overall** ministry of Catonsville Presbyterian Church. The vision is ministry—what we are doing and can do to embody God’s love and justice in this community. The vision is **people**, being kingdom people in Catonsville and ensuring that nothing hinders or hampers us from embracing it. With this debt eradicated, we will be free to expand the ministry and mission of the church all the more.

At one level, yes, this campaign is about dollars, it’s about money. But to say it’s only about dollars and debt is too crass and far too literal and completely misses the point. How we spend our dollars and work our debt to the benefit of the kingdom matter to God. Money is a powerful symbol of what matters most in life, which is why Jesus was furious with the money-changers in the temple, because they were making it about the money and not about the worship and service to God. The campaign is not only about the dollars and debt, but about the **people**—and over the next couple of weeks you will hear stories about people who have witnessed God’s love directly as a result of what we were able to accomplish through the renovation and taking on this debt. But now the debt needs to go away.

If the ministry and witness of this church matter ultimately to God and to us, then we will want to do whatever it takes to ensure that it thrives and can be all that it can be. If the future vision of this ministry and witness mean something to you, then you will want to do whatever it takes to allow the ministry to thrive and prosper. Today we enter into a season of prayerful discernment, leading up to Commitment Sunday on May 29, when we will make our three-year pledge. Between now and then we are asking everyone to take stock of their lives, to think about what this ministry means to you and those you love, and then ask God in prayer, what your part will be in helping us embrace this vision.
Now if you’re not a member of this church or maybe here for the first time, let me say, this is not the usual fare coming from this pulpit. But whether one is a member of this church or not, the vision God has for the church and for each of our lives is of ultimate significance to God. Realizing, reaching, embracing God’s vision or will is never easy, it’s a struggle, but a struggle that is worth it all for the joy one receives knowing that one’s life is participating in the work of God.

So here are some things to consider this Holy Week: What can I do to help accomplish God’s will—for this church, for my life, for the world? What commitment can I make that is meaningful to me? What can I give that demonstrates my faith, my devotion, my love for God’s will? Is something new being asked of you? What is the vision worth to you? What cost, what sacrifice am I able to make or, perhaps, called to make? What will it cost to know such joy?

And, finally, what matters most this week is that we fix our eyes upon Jesus. As the letter to the Hebrews urged us: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2, NIV). Did you notice the order here? It’s important. “…who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” That’s how one embraces the vision.

1 Cf. the hymn, “What Wondrous Love is This,” written by William Walker (1809-1875).