



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
Palm Sunday - April 14, 2019 Sermon

The Look of a Friend

John 12:12-19; Matthew 5:47-56

We are his friends, not because we have befriended him, but because he has befriended us. Jesus had said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." . . . And so it is with us. Look at him who is ever looking at you. With whatever faith you have, however feeble and flickering and mixed with doubt, look at him. Look at him with whatever faith you have and know that your worry about your lack of faith is itself a sign of faith. Do not look at your faith. Look at him. Keep looking, and faith will take care of itself.—Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*

Preface to First Scripture Lesson

The look on his face—that's what I want you to think about as you listen to this passage. The look on Jesus' face as he rides on the back of a donkey, looking at Jerusalem in the distance ("Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets who are sent to you!"), the look on Jesus' face as the crowd waves their palm branches and shouts its Hosannas, calling him blessed, calling him their king, as his disciples look on uncomprehendingly, as the Pharisees murmur to one another in the back, as the Scripture is fulfilled, the look on Jesus' face—that's what I want you to think about. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, John chapter 12 verses, 12-19 . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

The look on his face, that's what I want you to think about as you listen to this passage. The look on Jesus' face as Judas approaches with the crowd behind him carrying their swords and their clubs, the look on Jesus' face as Judas steps forward to greet him—"Hello, teacher,"— and then kisses him, the look on Jesus' face as Jesus calls him friend and tells him to do what he is here to do, as they then come forward to lay hands on him and arrest him. The look on Jesus' face—that's what I want you to think about. The arrest of Jesus, Matthew chapter 26, verses, 47-56 . . .

Sermon:

Imagine you're a movie director, making a movie about the life of Jesus. Yes, I know, it's been done before—but the Last Supper has been painted before, and that hasn't stopped artists from doing it again. So join me in a little imaginative finger-framing for the climactic scenes of the movie—from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to his arrest in the Garden at Gethsemane to his trial and crucifixion to his death and resurrection—how do you shoot those scenes, specifically how do you direct your actors in them?

Because, after all the script-writing and rewriting, all the casting and re-casting, all the set designing and blocking, all the camera angling and sound checks, after all the boom mikes and props are in their places, after all the costumes and lights and make-up are on, in short, after all the messing with the mis-scène; everyone's in place, the cameras are ready to roll, and it's come to this: How do you get your lead actor—the actor playing Jesus—to act the part?

And let's be candid: He's not the deepest river running to the sea, if you know what I mean. He's been cast for his good looks and box-office appeal, not for his intellectual and spiritual insight. Oh, yes, the camera loves him, so you're going to zoom in on him for a close up, and then cut away, back out to the disciples and the crowd, and then back in on him again—many times. But what expression or expressions should he have on his face for those? How should he act, how should he look? And how do you,

the director, convey that to *him*, the actor, right before the scene begins? Everyone's in place; the cameras, ready to roll; your Oscar depends on this. What do you say?

Ok: Start here. Keep it simple: He looks sad. Or in the words of the prophet Isaiah chapters 52 and 53, speaking of God's suffering servant: *He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.* Yes even in riding into Jerusalem, with the crowd shouting and waving their palm branches for him, there's a sadness in his eyes. He knows what's going to happen in Jerusalem: that, by the end of the week, "Hosanna, Hosanna!" will become "Crucify him, Crucify him!"

After all his own struggles: all the weeks fasting in the wilderness, all the temptations, the hours—the days—in prayer; and then also the triumph: the growing sense of clarity and purpose as to who he was, what he was sent to do, the growing awareness of the Father's abiding presence, a presence that had always been with him; and then the beginning of his earthly ministry, the baptism by John and John's recognition of him as the Messiah, the calling of the disciples, all the miracles and the healings, all the teaching and the preaching, the crowds following, growing larger, the feeding of the 5000, the disciples beginning to understand, slowly at times, painfully slow but still beginning to get it: growing in their friendship and their faith; and all along, all the signs of, all the excitement over, the kingdom of God—it's coming, the kingdom of God, it's already here, the kingdom of God—and now all of it, all for naught, soon enough all of it will come to nothing.

He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He looks sad. And yet with that sadness, also compassion. Or as the prophet puts it: *He was wounded because of our transgressions, he was bruised because of our iniquities.* The crowd that is now cheering for him, his own people—his own friends—will do this to him: will betray him, desert him, convict him, mock him, spit upon him, flog him, crucify and kill him. And it breaks his heart, it breaks his heart for *them*, that they would do this, breaks his heart because he loves them still.

When Judas steps forward to kiss him—the kiss of death—and then Jesus calls him "friend," he looks at Judas with the same look: the same look that he looks at the crowd with as he rides into Jerusalem, a look of sadness and compassion. "Father forgive them, for they know not what they will do." *He has compassion for us.*

Yes, he was wounded for *our* transgressions, bruised for *our* iniquities, and those transgressions, those iniquities, break his heart as they will soon break his body—but because he is our friend, because he wants what is best for us, because our transgressions, our iniquities, our sin, diminish us, make us less than what we were meant to be, separate us from God, one another, the world and ourselves—because he is our friend, Jesus has compassion for us.

And yet with sadness and compassion, also fear, resolution, obedience, and courage. As the prophet puts it: *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 that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*
... *Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.*

He knows what's going to happen to him in Jerusalem. He told the disciples numerous times, This one is from Mark's Gospel: *He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."*

Yes, he knows—he believes—he will rise again, but that doesn't make the prospect of crucifixion any easier. It was a particularly gruesome way to die: as your lungs slowly fill with fluid, and as you slowly lose the strength to pull yourself up to gasp for air, you suffocated. Slowly. It could take a while. It was a grie-

some way to die and the Romans knew it: When Spartacus led his unsuccessful slave revolt in the year 72 BCE, the Romans took the survivors captive and crucified them—6000 of them—along the Appian Way, the main thoroughfare into Rome. There was never another slave revolt for the duration of the Empire, more than half a millennium.

Jesus does not want to be crucified. In the Garden at Gethsemane, right before Judas comes to betray him, he prays: “Father if it be thy will, take this cup from me. Nevertheless not my will but thy will be done.” Three times he prays this. And after the third time, God’s will is clear. He stands up resolute—“Get up,” he says to the disciples, “let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.” He will obey. He faces his death with courage. *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 that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. . . . Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.*

With sadness and compassion, with fear, resolution, obedience, and courage—and also with authority. Again, through the prophet Isaiah, God says: *See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; The Lord shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.*

Contrary to what you might expect, Jesus is in charge of this whole sequence of events from his entry into Jerusalem to his crucifixion, to his death. Now it’s a reasonable question: How can someone who is betrayed, arrested, mocked, spat upon, tortured, convicted, sentenced to death, and then crucified be said to be in charge through of all that? Answer: Because God is in charge, and it is God’s will, and he has made his will one with God’s will. Even at the moment of betrayal, when Judas approaches him in the Garden, it is Jesus who gives the command: “Friend, do what you are here to do.” And when violence breaks out, it is Jesus’ who quells it with a command: “Put your sword back into its place.”

And then he makes clear that his authority comes from God, saying: *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*

And next he makes it clear that he is being obedient to God’s will: *“But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way? . . . All this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” He shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; The Lord shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.*

His look is one of authority. And also, one of humor. Yes, humor, a certain ironic humor with just a glint of hope, a promise of joy. Isaiah again:

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; Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

He is not just a king, he is *the* king; not just the the king of Israel (as the palm-waving crowds proclaim) but the king of glory, the king of kings, the son of God, the one who rules over not only all human rulers and all human history, but all the universe. And yet think how Jesus comes into Jerusalem—not quite the way a Roman emperor or a conquering general would come into Rome. First, coming into Rome, there would be a mile-long parade of booty, treasure, prisoners, exotic animals and foreigners dressed in their exotic garb—impressive! Then the emperor or general who had brought this all home, standing in a chariot drawn by four white horses, followed by his sons and all his officers riding on horseback behind him, followed by ranks and ranks and ranks of Roman legions, with their arms and their armor glittering in the sun. Along the way the crowds would shout “Io Triumphe” in imperial Latin, loud enough to be heard from the Tiber river to the Circus Maximus to the Forum and back again.

In contrast, Jesus rides by himself on the back of a donkey, with a few hundred peasants dressed in peasants’ garb, shouting “Hosanna,” not in imperial Latin, but in Hebrew, the language of a small, conquered people, maybe loud enough to be heard the next block over. And yet he is not just the emperor, but the em-

peror of all emperors, the king of all kings. There is a certain incongruity to it all, much like the incongruity in the phrase, “lowly pomp,” as in the words of our hymn: “Ride on, ride on in majesty, in lowly pomp to die.”

In Sunday School, during Lent, we’ve been reading a novel called *The Blood of the Lamb* written about 60 years ago by Peter De Vries. It’s about a man named Don Wanderhope, who loses his 11-year-old daughter, Carol, to leukemia, and along the way, like Job, struggles mightily, and at times humorously, with God. On the day that Carol dies, Wanderhope had been bringing her a cake in the hospital, thinking that this would be the day of her coming home. At the end of that awful day, after six or seven drinks in a nearby bar, heartbroken and unsteady, Wanderhope stands in front of the church, the Catholic Church next to the hospital—where he’s been going regularly during Carol’s illness to pray and fight with God—he stands there with the cake box in his hand, looking up. He looks up at the crucifix—Jesus hanging on the cross—that looms large over the front door. He takes the cake out of its box, and balances it in his hand. You can guess what happens next. De Vries has been setting this scene up for most of the novel. Earlier, when they were watching TV together—a kids’ show with clowns—Wanderhope and Carol had commented on the way that, when one clown throws a cake or pie in the face of the other, he then just stands there passively allowing the other clown to throw one in his face. It’s kind of a ritual, Wanderhope and his precocious daughter agree. What do rituals do? Symbolize, re-enact, make present again, some higher truth, some greater reality.

So there stands Wanderhope: having already gotten his cake in the face—the death of Carol—he’s going to return the favor. With all his might, with all his grief and all his fury, he lets it fly. And then we get this: *It was miracle enough that the pastry should reach its target at all, more so that it should land squarely just beneath the crown of thorns. Then through scalded eyes I seemed to see the hands free themselves from the nails and move slowly towards the soiled face. Very slowly, very deliberately, with infinite patience, the icing was wiped from the eyes and flung away. I could see it fall in clumps to the porch steps. Then the cheeks were wiped down with the same sense of grave and gentle ritual, with all the kind sobriety of one whose voice could be heard saying, “Suffer the little children to come unto me . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”*

There is a certain incongruity to it all—the king of kings getting a cake in the face like a clown. And then so ceremoniously, so ritualistically, wiping it off, as if to say, “Yes, I have—yes, I do—suffer for you, but she suffers no more, she lives with me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” What do rituals do? Symbolize, re-enact, make present again, some higher truth, some greater reality. *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; Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*

And so maybe we tell our young actor [finger-framing] this: first, sadness; then compassion; then fear, resolution, obedience, and courage; then authority, and then finally, humor, a certain ironic humor with just a glint of hope, a promise of joy. Or maybe we might just say this to him: “On the night of his arrest, Jesus said this: ‘You are my friends, greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends.’ Think of the look on his face when he said—the look of a friend. Think of that. Keep that look always before you—and let all your acting—everything you say and do from now on—follow from that.” It’s not bad direction for us, either.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ—our Lord and our friend.
Amen.