

**March 14, 2021**  
**Listening to God**  
To Find Your Purpose  
So I Can Learn to Listen to my Heart  
Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11  
Mark 11:1-11  
Matthew 26:36-46

The crowd cheered at the motley procession coming into Jerusalem that day. There were no bands like we would expect in a parade. There were no horses or soldiers as there were earlier when Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, entered Jerusalem earlier. Pilate came to be sure that order was maintained during the Jewish Passover. He entered riding on a large horse and accompanied by intimidating soldiers. He exuded power that would not hesitate to use violence if he thought it would keep Jerusalem under control.

It was the time of Passover that celebrated the Hebrew peoples' escape from Egypt. The population of Jerusalem at least doubled during this time, and more likely tripled or even quadrupled. It was a volatile time and there was a high possibility of a riot of some sort against the Roman government.

The crowd that greeted Jesus hoped and expected that he was going to begin the process of overthrowing Rome and taking back control of their homeland. "Hosanna" was not a shout of praise as much as it was a plea and a rallying cry. "Hosanna" means "save us" and that is what the crowd was shouting. Save us from this Roman oppression and control.

There was good reason for them to believe that Jesus was coming exactly to do that. He came in riding a donkey – not the horse of the military. His ragtag group of followers were far from intimidating and powerful soldiers. However, the symbolism here could not be missed. King David always rode a donkey rather than a horse, because although a slower animal, it was much better suited to the rugged terrain of the area. The donkey considered to be a humble animal also reflected David's identity as a shepherd king.

It's important to note that Jesus did not need to ride an animal to get from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. It was a short two-mile walk; one that Jesus had made

before. This trip into Jerusalem is the only time that the scriptures mention Jesus doing anything other than walking. There was great symbolism in his entry that day, and that symbolism was not lost on either the crowd or the Roman authorities.

There were definitely people there looking for him to overthrow the Roman government, but at the same time, he was popular because of who he was. Ordinary people were attracted to him. Throughout his life crowds gathered to catch a glimpse of him. Sick or disabled people came to him for healing. Fishermen had left their nets and boats and followed him. The poor gathered around him. Outcasts felt welcomed, loved, and accepted. Parents brought children to see him. People believed that somehow, he had the answer to their problems.

Jesus brought good news to people who were struggling. He healed the sick. He practiced what he preached. He treated each person as someone who was special. Religion for many had become cold, restrictive, full of laws and sometimes even abusive and exploitive. Religion for many did not speak to their hurts. It did not bring them joy. Jesus brought something new, radical, full of love and inclusion, full of hope and joy. And if, on top of all this, he was going to overthrow Rome, what's not to celebrate?

During Lent, we've been talking about the many ways that we can be intentional about listening to God, talking to God, turning to God. In Jesus we see the best possible picture of who God is, what God values, what God wants.

Some years ago, Mel Gibson produced a movie called "The Passion of the Christ." It focused on the last twelve hours of Jesus' earthly life. It was a violent movie and hard to watch. With all due respect, what he called the Passion of Christ is a very limited view and fails to even begin to focus on the much broader question about what really was Christ's passion. What were the things that he was passionate about?

The crowd knew his passion. Jesus' passion and, I believe, his purpose was to reveal as much of God to us as we could understand. Everything about his life and ministry proclaimed service, love, and a commitment to love even one's enemies. He spoke in ways that the average person could understand. He spoke so that the poor people of Israel could readily identify and understand what he was talking about and what was important to him – and to God.

Jesus lived and breathed everything that he knew about God and that he wanted us to know and understand. He is our model for a relationship with God. Throughout scripture we see him often going away by himself to pray, to commune with, to talk with and listen to God. In today's scripture we are given a wonderful glimpse into his prayer life in a time when he prayed passionately for himself.

The procession into Jerusalem was the beginning of that last week of his earthly life. His entry truly sealed his fate because now the Romans saw also his potential danger to their power and their control and their government. He had known going into Jerusalem that this was where he would die, but as the week continued the reality really sank in.

On Thursday night, in the garden he prayed for himself. He didn't want to die. He would have preferred to live. His prayer, by the way, reminds us that we, too, can and should pray for ourselves when we are being truly honest with God.

That night things took on a life of their own. Up until that night, I believe that Jesus could have run away. He could have saved himself. But that night, in the garden, he had to make a really tough decision.

He prayed that if it were possible that he would not have to die. I believe that Jesus' primary purpose in coming to us was to show God to us. Many years ago, a bird got into my house and I wanted desperately to help the bird get out. My much bigger size was frightening to the bird. I remember wishing that I could be a bird for just a minute to show the bird the way out. I believe that's what Jesus did, he became God in the flesh so that we could see God, so that he could reflect God to us.

I believe that it was because of this that Jesus had to die. He could have run away and with him out of the scene, the Romans would have no reason to crucify him as an insurrectionist, a threat to Rome. He could have encouraged his disciples to fight. He could have pleaded with God to send angels to save him. He could have done many things, but any of them would have been a direct contradiction of who he was and all that he had been teaching. Any of them would have made him into someone different than who he really was.

That night as he prayed, "If there's any way get me out of this", he would have preferred to live, but at the same time, he prayed that what was most important was not

what he wanted but what was needed, what was necessary under those circumstances. Jesus was passionate about God, and the kingdom of God, and God's passion for justice and that could not be denied.

Wouldn't it have been wonderful if the world had listened to him, had responded differently to him? Wouldn't it have been wonderful if people had been willing to set aside power and control in favor of love and inclusion. But that didn't happen and at this point Jesus was killed because of the sins of the world. There was no other option than dying and trusting God. We know where that trust led. That trust led to the greatest upside-down surprise ever. Death did not have the victory, God did. Life did!

But that's looking ahead, isn't it and that's something that I am grateful that we are able to do. That looking ahead, that promise, that remembering what happened on Easter helps us face what is happening on the days like Friday, when there seems to be no hope.

Jesus didn't want to die, and God didn't force him to die. But he was willing to do what was necessary at that time and that place. There was a purpose to his life, to reveal God to us and he did it by living a fully human life. He did it by helping us to know that our God is not a far-off deity but our God is a God who understands what it means to be human, who understands when we are afraid, when we want to run away, but don't.

I imagine that there were times when Martin Luther King Jr would have wanted to walk away, to stop the protests, the organizing, the speeches. But he had a purpose in life, and he knew it. He had a dream that as he expressed "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Sadly, that dream has not yet been fully realized. But he had a dream and a purpose, and nothing could stop him from working toward that dream, that hope, that purpose. He listened to his heart and the message that was beating loudly there, and he committed himself to a purpose that was bigger than he was.

Throughout history there have been many who have understood their purpose and have committed themselves to something bigger than they were. They have faced days when they probably prayed, "God, if possible, get me out of this, but please not

what I want, but what you want.” That doesn’t mean that God is forcing them to do something, but rather that in the name of the good that is God’s passion, they are willing to do what they would prefer not to do.

There’s been a lot of that this past year. People who would have preferred to stay home and be safe have been out there working and taking risks with their own health because what they were doing was bigger than themselves. They could have stayed home but they knew that there were consequences to that action. We all know that if medical people don’t go to work, people will die. This year, we also learned that if grocery clerks and truck drivers don’t go to work, if they didn’t take risks this year, then there would be no food or necessary supplies for any of us. We have become more aware of the many different kinds of work that people do that is so essential.

Most pastors never wanted to preach to a computer screen. Most people have never wanted computer screens to be the only way they could visit grandchildren and friends. This year, we have learned that when we do the things we know we have to do, even when we don’t want to, we are praying “God, if possible get us out of this” but we also realize that we do what we need to because it is not only about us; it is about all the people around us.

The message of Lent reminds us that we are not alone, and that Jesus understands what we are feeling and experiencing and that he has felt these things as well. The message of Easter reminds us that out of death, and sadness, and fear, and grief, comes new life. That my friends, is a message that I believe we can and must hold on to.

This year, maybe more than at any other time, we have come to understand that we are all dependent and intertwined with people that we don’t even know and will never meet. Their actions affect us, and our actions affect them. Contact tracing has helped us see the network in which we live. We are, I hope, finally beginning to really understand that we are part of each other and that our purpose is to do as Jesus did and reflect God’s love in everything we do.

Let us pray:

Our loving God, you sent Jesus to live among us so that we might better know you; know your love for us, and that we might better love you and reflect your love to a

hurting world. In all that we say and do, in all that we are, help us to be mirrors of your love, compassion, grace, and mercy so that others may come to know and love you better through our lives. Amen.