

Vol. 53, No. 2, Year C
April, May, June 2025

Will Willimon's

Pulpit Resource



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The Journey of the Sermon

Will you agree with me when I say that the worst sermon feedback is none at all. Even the most hostile feedback from listeners after a sermon is a sure sign that they are listening and that the work you put into preaching, using *Pulpit Resource* as a conversation partner, has been worth the effort.

Criticism of your sermon is often a sign that you have succeeded in creating a trusting, open relationship with your listeners. We must never forget that some negative reactions to your sermon may be hard to hear because they are right. Listener anger may indicate that your listeners are more heavily invested in the sermon's subject than you. And besides, whether they hear or refuse to hear (Ezekiel 3:11) at least they'll know that you are trying to do your job by loving the word of God and your listeners at the same time.

Little listener response? Now you know how God feels. Keep preaching. The gospel is accustomed to making its way in difficult settings.

If you listen attentively and appreciatively, post sermon your parishioners will tell you the sermons they're dying to hear.

Speak with care and compassion, but don't allow your need to care for your people to determine the parameters of what God may elect to say. If someone says something like, "I was troubled by what you said today in your sermon," the proper response is not to apologize for what you said, it's to say, "Really? Please tell me more."

No sermon's over until the Holy Spirit says it's over. Sometimes the best sermons are the ones your people preach back to you weeks after you thought your sermon was done.



Will Willimon

(

Of course, some of these thoughts are from my book, *Listeners Dare: Listening for God in the Sermon* [Abingdon Press, 2022].)

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October, November, December 2024
Vol. 53, No. 2, Year C
ISBN 9781791035341

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DISTRIBUTOR
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April 6, 2025

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalms 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8



Selected reading:

John 12:1-8

Theme:

A Christian is someone who has, by the invitation of Christ, become a friend of Christ. We are with Christ, at the Lord's Table, in Christ's church, on the basis of his invitation, bound together by his love. Each of us loves Christ differently but he loves each of us passionately. Amid all of our differences, we must keep remembering that we have one thing in common: Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the readings:

Isaiah 43:16-21

Isaiah the prophet recalls God's gracious deliverance in the Exodus and speaks God's word to Israel, "I am making a way in the wilderness."

Philippians 3:4b-14

Paul tells the story of his life and how he came to know Christ, considering all that went before as nothing compared with Christ, saying that he is pressing on in the faith.

John 12:1-8

John unfolds the great mystery of the incarnation.

Prayer:

Lord, we walk with you because you have invited each of us to be companions on your journey. We confess that sometimes we are confused by the direction you ask us to walk. At other times, we wonder if we have what it takes to endure the rigors of the journey. And, to be frank, sometimes it's hard to continue on a trip with those whom you ask us to travel!

Give us the grace to believe that you knew what you were doing when you called each of us, each of us in our many weaknesses, differences and difficulties to walk with you. Help us more fully to offer ourselves to you and to use our gifts in your service.

Rekindle in us the wonder that of all whom you could have called to walk with you, you called us.

Amen.

Look Who's at the Table

Encountering the text:

It's become a commonplace observation that we live in a age of divisions, polarities, and conflicts. Even in the church. Especially in the church. In a time where there's conflict in many congregations, I think it's good to be reminded that (reading between the lines) so much of scripture is written in conflicted times.

Most biblical scholars would agree that John's Gospel was composed during a time of persecution and intramural conflict in early Christian congregations. Perhaps that's why this gospel frequently draws such distinct, binary distinctions between who's in and who's out. Light/dark. Jew/Gentile. Believer/nonbeliever. World/community. Blessed/condemned.

And yet, even in John's polarized presentation of Jesus, we also note that here is a gospel that contains many memorable characters who do not easily fit into neat, definitive, opposing camps. I'm thinking of characters like Nicodemus, the Woman at the Well, Lazarus, and (on this Sunday in Lent) Mary and Martha.

And the wonder is that these different people, even in their differences, are bound together by one thing: Jesus.

In just a few deft strokes, John renders three very different personalities who gather around Jesus. Mary is a person who is loved by Jesus and who seems to have been a steadfast follower of Jesus all the way along. Just before this Sunday's gospel, Jesus has raised Mary's brother Lazarus, calling him out of the tomb. In this Sunday's narrative, Mary pours expensive ointment upon Jesus as an extravagant outpouring of her love for and high regard for Jesus. We aren't told what Mary was thinking or what, if any, message she hoped to convey by this act. We are told nothing except what she has done.

Earlier, John has introduced Mary as one who "anointed the Lord with

fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair" (11:2). Here (12:3), this anointing seems to be a hint about Jesus's royalty. Kings and priests were anointed (see Exodus 40:15; 1 Samuel 16:12). But perhaps Mary is signifying something else. The sick were anointed because the oil was thought to have both medicinal and sacred effects (see Mark 6:13; James 5:14). The dead were anointed for burial as a ritual sign of cleansing (e.g., Mark 16:1). So a whole host of images—Lordship, healing, death, honor, cleansing might come to mind. Mary's actions prepare the way for Jesus's climactic "hour" in which Jesus will be "glorified" (12:23) as he is lifted up on a cross. In his brutal dying will also at the same time be his grand exaltation.

Mary tenderly, lovingly wipes Jesus's feet. In the next chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus will wipe his disciples' feet (13:5; the Greek word, *ekmasso*, is used in both episodes). Jesus tells his disciples that he has washed their feet as an example for them to follow (13:14-15). All of this suggests that Mary is the exemplary, from start to finish disciple.

Mary's sister Martha is depicted as the one who is busy serving Jesus dinner (12:2). Luke describes Martha's actions at this supper as due to her being distracted by many tasks in (Luke 10:40). Don't conflate Luke's account of Martha with John's. Jesus praises Martha (John 12:2) for her "service" or "ministry" (the Greek word, *diakoneo*), saying that his Father will honor whoever serves him (John 12:26). Both Mary and Martha perform services to others, but in different ways.

Both sisters are quite different from those of that "devil" Judas, whose betrayal of Jesus was alluded to earlier in the gospel (John 6:70-71). John 12:4 is Judas's first appearance. We are told that he is a hypocrite whose mention of the poor is put forth as a calculated cover for his greed.



April 2025

Amid all the controversy that swirls around Jesus, all of the public's division of opinion about Jesus, John gives us the intimate moment where those closest to Jesus are named and presented as very different people, all related to Jesus, but in very different ways.

Proclaiming the text:

If you recall, we began our Lenten journey with Jesus in the wilderness. There Jesus was confronted by his Satanic adversary who tried to tempt him away from the path his heavenly Father had set before him. Jesus resisted Satan's wiles. He stood up to Satan and was undeterred in his journey.

On this Fifth Sunday of the forty days of Lent, as we come closer to the climactic end of the Jesus story, we are not out in the wilderness. We are in an intimate domestic setting where Jesus gathers with two of his best friends and the one who will be one of his most notorious enemies. And here, toward the end, Jesus spends an evening with them at the home of Mary and Martha. Look who's at the table.

Mary doesn't say much that evening, at least not much that John recalls. She speaks through actions, not words. While Jesus is at table, Mary lets down her hair and anoints his feet with sweet smelling, soothing balm. In ancient Israel kings were crowned by anointing their heads with oil. Mary shows, with this anointing of Jesus with sweet-smelling, expensive oil, that she sees what so many have failed to see: Jesus is none other than the Christ, the Messiah, the long-awaited King sent by God to rule in the name of God.

And yet Jesus, by his response to Mary's actions, gives her acclamation of him as king a twist. He doesn't receive the anointing as a king, but as a man on his way to die. In Israel, dead bodies were cleansed and anointed for burial. Sweet-smelling oil was rubbed upon the decaying flesh as sign of love, honor, and preservation.

And right there with Mary is Judas. Lord, look who's at the table. Judas is one of the chosen inner circle. One of the twelve. Mary is not referred to explicitly as a "disciple." But Judas certainly was. Judas, who has been among those who have had a front row seat on all of Jesus's teachings and wonders, condemns Mary's actions as wasteful. The money would have been better utilized to aid some of the suffering of the poor! Right Jesus?

When Judas expresses outrage at Mary's anointing of Jesus, Jesus instructs Judas, "This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how

she has used it."

I expect Mary was taken aback by Jesus' statement. She meant to honor a royal, powerful king. Jesus speaks to her about his death. A king who is crucified? Jesus turns an occasion for royal anointing into a teaching moment about the strange nature of who he is and what he is about to do.

Oh yes. A third person is there. Martha. Martha doesn't have anything to say in this episode. Martha is too busy in the kitchen whipping up a meal for Jesus. And, if she has overheard what Jesus said about his impending death, for all Martha knows this could be Jesus's last meal before his execution.

We really don't know what Martha was thinking because all we know about her is her actions. Her sister Mary doesn't say much but she gives much in anointing Jesus' and wiping his feet with her tears. Martha is an activist of a different sort, busy preparing to host a meal for Jesus on his last journey.

So here, toward the end, we have three very different people with whom Jesus spends his last hours before his death. Mary and Martha, in different ways, minister to Jesus in his hour of need. Judas, a formal disciple who would eventually become a betrayer, attempts to speak for Jesus and instruct Mary in proper behavior.

Maybe you wish that extravagant, boundary breaking, emotional Mary wasn't there with Jesus. Some of us become uncomfortable around those who become overly emotional around Jesus.

Or is her sister Martha the one whose presence in the story seems superfluous? She doesn't say anything or contribute to any of the action of the narrative. She has no religious, spiritual words or deeds. She's in the kitchen. Preparing a meal. Why would Jesus spend his precious time with her?

And then there's Judas. As I said, Judas was a member of Jesus' inner circle of disciples from the very first. Is there not a part of you that wishes Judas wasn't there? You know how the story of the relationship of Jesus and Judas shall end. It's heartwarming to have Mary and Martha showing their love and devotion to Jesus. It's not sweet or heartwarming to have Judas there, history's greatest false friend.

It's also uncomfortable for Judas to have one of the best—and indeed most faithful—lines in the story: "This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" Judas pronounces a couple of profound truths. The perfume as over-the-top expen-

sive. A year's worth of wages? Think of all the good that could come from that? The median USA income is about \$70,000. Do you know the good that our church could do if one of you were to say to me after service, "Pastor, here's a year's worth of wages, go do some good for the poor?"

It's rather offensive that two of the most truthful and faithful lines in the story—this perfume is an extravagant waste, a lot of good could be done with this much money—are delivered by a scoundrel like Judas!

On his way to do something very, very costly for us, Jesus pauses for an evening with three of his followers: Mary, Martha, and Judas. He doesn't condemn any of them. He doesn't order any of them to stop what they are doing for him or say to any of them, "You know, you seem to have so badly misunderstood me and my mission that it's time for you to leave."

John says that Judas was insincere, that he said what he said about giving the money to the poor, not because Judas gave a rip about the poor but because he was trying to hide his own greed by acting like he was concerned about the plight of the poor. John says that Judas was a hypocrite and greedy. But Jesus doesn't. Rather, Jesus says, maybe with great sadness, that he is leaving all three of his friends. "You won't always have me."

He is headed toward his cross. And on the way to his cross, Jesus pauses to interact with three very different friends, two of whom love him in different ways, and one who will not know how to love him and will betray him but three different people convened by Jesus. The one thing these three different people have in common is Jesus.

You know where he is headed, don't you? You know how this story will end? That horrific, violent end is alluded to by Jesus in his comments about anointing for death and in his concluding comment, "You won't always have me." He is going to his cross where he will lay down his life for sinners, only sinners. Later he would say that there's no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends (John 15:13). Mary, Martha,...Judas, you and me. Sinners all, sinners, friends and betrayers, loved by a Friend Jesus, whom we didn't know how to befriend.

I say, thank God Judas was there. If only Mary and Martha were there with Jesus that evening at table, then I could preach a hortatory sermon to you using Mary and Martha as examples of what you need to do in order to be good friends of Jesus. I could say that, "Some of you are



like Mary, singing songs of adoration, praying, sometimes shedding a loving tear, expressing your love for Jesus in ways that are sometimes too deep for words. Sure, Jesus may sometimes say some things to you that you don't understand, but still there, you are, lovin' on Jesus.

"But others of you are like good old, practical, busy bee Martha. We feel closest to Jesus when we are busy in service to the needs of others. Sitting here in church is fine, but what's best is to be busy working to enact and embody what we believe."

"Come on church, let's try real hard to be a Martha or a Mary and show Jesus who his friends really are."

I could have preached a sermon like that if Judas had not been there that night. Some of us are here (and I count myself among you) more closely resembling Judas than Mary or Martha. Jesus has called us to be his disciples. We know enough to know that we want to be close to Jesus, but we don't always fully understand Jesus. We have gotten some sense of who he is and what his way requires of us, but not all of it.

Maybe it was easy for Judas to prattle on about the plight of the poor, to boldly brag about his concern that our resources be well used in behalf of others, easy when you are there in the cozy confines of Mary and Martha's living room. But then the going gets rough, the world gets organized against Jesus and his way and we realize there can be a high cost of discipleship and...well, let's just say that in one way or another we betray Jesus. We fail to live up to our commitments. We didn't know that following Jesus would be so costly. We cut and run.

As Jesus goes to his crucifixion, there to dramatically rearrange our notions of God, power, love and death, he gathers with his close friends. Some of them adoringly worship him, others roll up their sleeves and serve him and some...misrepresent, betray and forsake him. Mary. Martha. Judas. All with Jesus.

Say what you will about us, the followers of Jesus. We have our differences. We are a gathering of some very different people. We are not all on the same page. We're not all in the same place so far as our faith is concerned. And yet, here we are, gathered by Jesus. Different folks with many differences between us, nothing that keeps us together except our willingness to be loved by Jesus.

Say what you will about Jesus. Sometimes what he says is hard to understand. Confusing. Sometimes what he expects of us, as his friends, is demanding and difficult. And yet, even on his way to the cross, he keeps gathering us, hanging out with us, talking to us, enjoying our company, loving us as his church.

Lord, look who's at the table.

I noticed that he didn't commune. Whenever our church celebrated the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, he always remained in his seat when everyone else came forward to receive the bread and the wine, the body and blood.

So I dropped by his home one day and, after some conversation, just put it to him point blank: "How come you don't come forward and join us at the Lord's Table when we have Communion?"

He replied, "Look preacher. I've done some things I'm not too proud of. I am still not at all the person I know I should be. I just don't think I'm worthy."

I won't go into all that I said in response but I did say, "Look. This is the *Lord's* table. This is the *Lord's* Supper. It's the *Lord* who invites you, not me. Your gathering at his table, joining with fellow sinners in his church, this is the *Lord's* idea of a good time, not mine."

Relating the text:

Contentiousness in your congregation? Disagreements about the purpose and mission of the church? Otherwise genteel and decorous congregants showing their fangs to one another? While it's true we live in a combative, quarrelsome age where political divides also afflict the church, it's important to see some of this trouble as an expected spinoff of Jesus Christ's wildly expansive notion of salvation.

A Savior who sets out to seek, find, and save the lost who (Luke 19:10), when criticized because of the company he kept at table smirked, "If you are well, you don't need a doctor," (Matthew 9:12, paraphrased) "I've not come for good, respectable, Bible-believing, justice-advocating, hypersensitive-to-other-people's-wounds church people. I've come for sinners, only sinners."

Or as Paul put it to one of his contentious, disagreeing and disagreeable, combative, quarrelsome congregations, "You might be willing to die for a really, really good person but he shows his love

for us in that he died only for bad people—us" (Romans 5:7 paraphrased).

The chief charge against Jesus was that he saved those whom no one thought could be saved, no one wanted saved. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

Never once did Jesus command us to love the lovely, loveable, and loving. Never did he allow his disciples to waste time attempting to determine which sin was the worst or who to ban from being a disciple.

Jesus' determination to save sinners, only sinners, would be challenge enough for us sinners without Jesus' equally determined insistence to put those being-redeemed sinners in the church.

Christ fervently prayed that all of his followers (church) would "be one" (John 17:21) and commanded us to get along with one another. Yet, from the first, we've been unable to live up to his expectations, having so little in common except love for him.

In your church and mine, let's face it: we congregate because we've been assembled. Little wonder that, from the first, there was disputation.

A group of clergy were bemoaning the divisions in our congregations.

"Not mine," said one. "Never served a more loving, unified church. We're all on the same page."

Widespread resentment among the clergy there gathered.

"Well Tom, if you've got a unified, harmonious congregation, then you have failed at evangelism."

Dispute, division, and differences may not be signs that we have fallen short of church but rather signs that we are actually living out Christ's wildly expansive corporate salvation.

Be honest. The most challenging aspect of being commissioned by Christ is to be gathered by Christ with those with whom we have little in common other than Christ.

Again: The chief charge against Jesus was, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

Still does.

—Will Willimon, *Don't Look Back: Methodist Hope for What Comes Next*, (Abingdon, 2023).

Selected reading:

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Theme:

Jesus Christ comes into the world he created and loved, coming among us as one of us in order to draw near to us. And yet, in our rejection and crucifixion of him, we withdrew from him. The church sometimes deserves the scorn of the world because of the sorry way we have followed Jesus. Yet sometimes the church is scorned precisely because we have followed Jesus.

Introduction to the readings:

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the Suffering Servant who suffers in obedience to God's will.

Philippians 2:5-11

Though Christ was God, he humbled himself and became a servant to all humanity.

Luke 19:28-40

Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem in a joyous parade.

Prayer:

Lord as we witness your rejection by the authorities, religious and secular, the animosity of the crowd at your cross, and even the betrayal by your own disciples, we confess our own many cowardly betrayals of you. Each of us, in our own ways, have played a part in the world's rejections of you.

Sometimes the world has rejected you because of the sorry witness we have given to the world. The world has looked at us, the way we live our lives, how we spend our money, and the things we say and do toward our neighbors, and has rejected you because of us.

Sometimes, when the world has followed its own way of power, oppression, and greed, we have joined the world's rejection of you rather than followed your way of love and justice.

For all the ways we have rejected you, even when we may not have known that we were rejecting you, forgive us loving Lord. Keep reaching out to us in love even when we turn away from you. Keep calling us to follow you even when we diverge from your path.

That we might walk this Holy Week with you, might thereby move closer to you, and might have our faith strengthened by you. Amen.



April 13, 2025

Palm Sunday: The Passion of the Lord

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 19:28-40

Luke 22:14-23:56

The One Whom the World Rejected

Encountering the text:

The appointed psalm for Palm/Passion Sunday is 118, a grand shout of repeated thanksgiving and gratitude. The Hebrew word for "thanks" (*todah*) not only encompasses the expression of thanksgiving but also the grateful giving of a gift in return, something of value from one's possessions.

On the face of it, thanksgiving is a relatively easy affair. Yet a responsiveness in gratitude and thanksgiving can be a challenge in our cultural context. We are a culture of self-made individuals who like to think that our lives are self-concocted. Not much thanksgiving and gratitude in that sort of society. What would it mean for us to see our lives as gifts and to respond, in all things, with thanksgiving?

Thanksgiving is easier when we are responding to something that we have wanted, some gift that we deeply desired. But thanksgiving to God is tough when difficulties and sorrows come our way. What would it mean to give God thanks when we receive that which we do not want?

Psalm 118 has an evocative phrase which surely accounts for why Psalm 118 is selected for Palm/Passion Sunday—"the stone which the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone." That inferior, unsuitable stone that was tossed aside by the builders is now taken up and used by the master builder, God, for God's lasting building projects. What would it mean to believe that those who seem unsuitable, inferior are God's chosen building projects?

Worshippers stand before the grand gates of the Temple shouting, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." This day is the day that is the creation of God. We are on the move

toward God's house, toward God, toward the future that God is creating. What would it mean to believe that all our days, even the worst of them, are gifts of God?

In the psalms, there is a "think/thank" dynamic. When we give thanks for some great gift, we think of the giver. When Jews read Psalm 118, they are apt to think of the Passover from Egyptian slavery. The Common English Bible translates Psalm 118:24 as, "This is the day on which the Lord has acted." The creative work of the Lord did not end with the seventh day of creation. The Lord's creative action continues now as a rabbi bounces into Jerusalem on a donkey. This day, the day when Jesus enters Jerusalem, is a day the Lord has made.

In this glorious day, and the next days to come during this Holy Week, we shall see that the one rejected by the world returned the world's rejection not with rejection but rather with welcoming, life-giving, sacrificial love.

This is that glorious, ironic day when we welcome as "King" the one who was rejected.

Proclaiming the text:

*The stone rejected by the builders
is now the main foundation stone!
This has happened because of the LORD;
it is astounding in our sight!*

We have followed him through the dusty, obscure towns of Galilee. We have listened to his teaching, pondered his stories, and witnessed his healing wonders. At moments, there were great crowds trudging after him. But as the days wore on and opposition to him got better organized, the crowds dwindled.

"Blessed are those who take no offense in me" he had said. (Matt 11:6) But many were offended by him. "Who



is this?" they asked. Who is this who presumes to teach about our tradition, sometimes teaching against the tradition? Who is this who presumes to forgive sin, to criticize our ways of doing things?

Earlier he had said that his intention was to "go up to Jerusalem," up to the capital city, the seat of power, that nation's center, up to the mighty temple. We assumed that would be when he would stop talking about his way as the way of suffering service and speak now of his way as the path toward power. He was compassionate in all things but his compassion seemed ineffective, unable to change the great social issues of the day. Now, moving toward Jerusalem, at last he is moving toward seizing power, toward a more effective, efficient means of accomplishing good.

And yet, on the day of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, once again he thwarts our expectations. Things are not going as we planned, or as we had hoped. He enters the city, not welcomed by the mayor who presents him with the key to the city, but rather by a gaggle of chanting children. He receives no royal welcome but rather the welcome of common folks who cut palm branches and wave them as he enters.

It was clear then that the one whom we, his disciples, had elected as the Messiah, the

Anointed One of God, had been rejected by almost everyone else as just another failed would-be revolutionary, just one more Ninety-day Wonder who suddenly walked out on the world's stage and then, just as quickly, left, slinking off the stage in humiliation to the shouts of, "Messiah! Ha! That's not the one we were expecting!"

I imagine, of all the tough things that Jesus' disciples witnessed, Jesus' rejection by the world, his being cast aside by people high and low, was the most difficult for them to witness. Imagine what the world's rejection of Jesus must have felt like to Simon and Andrew, and the others who had left their families behind and had hit the road with Jesus with a mere, "Follow me!"

Perhaps it's then that they recalled Psalm 118. It's a joyous psalm of thanksgiving, probably sung (maybe even shouted) by worshippers as they came up the grand stairs to the great Temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, perhaps knowing that this visit would have been interpreted by the skittish Roman occupation forces and they would have killed him then and

there. Some of the gospels say that Jesus went into the Temple and kicked over the tables of the Temple moneychangers, driving them out of the sacred precincts and infuriating the priests who made their livings off managing the Temple trade.

For actions like that, the gospels say that the religious authorities, the Bible scholars, the righteous, rejected Jesus. And that's why a key verse, particularly on this Sunday, is this one: *The stone rejected by the builders*

*is now the main foundation stone!
This has happened because of the LORD;
it is astounding in our sight!*

Jesus has been rejected by all the presumed builders and keepers of Israel. They refuse to welcome him to the city with joy. But Jesus has not been rejected by God. The Father receives the Son into the capital city.

Maybe we Christians have to keep learning again and again that great Palm Sunday truth: those whom the world rejects, God makes part of the new foundation.

I wish there were more people here this morning. I wish that Christianity were more popular in our culture, that we were not the brunt of ridicule and derision in the popular media. I wish that there were more of this town's "movers and shakers" among us. Would that our church was the biggest, most impressive and beautiful building in town.

And yet, if we could boast of any of those impressive attainments, then perhaps today's scripture would make us nervous. This faith is built upon the foundation of the One whom the world failed to recognize as its Lord and Savior. On Palm Sunday, Jesus Christ entered the gates of Jerusalem, not with everyone saying, "This is the God we have been waiting for," but rather with the bigwigs scoffing, "A Messiah, a Savior bouncing into town on the back of a shaggy donkey? What good does that do?"

And how about you? There may have been a day when this congregation was one of the biggest institutions in this city. Now, we are smaller, fewer in number. It appears, if you just count up the numbers, that the world is voting with its feet, that the world has rejected this church as the answer to what's wrong with this town.

And yet, Psalm 118, and this day remind us that we are the peculiar way this God saves. Any good work that God wants to do in this town, God chooses to do it through the "stone which the build-

ers have rejected." The world appears to have rejected both Jesus and us as the solution to what ails the world. Yet God loves to work through that which the world rejects.

One reason why I love this church is that there are some among you (I promise that I'll not name names!) who are more or less rejected by the world (with its standards of power and glory) and yet who God has clearly chosen to work through in order to accomplish God's purposes for the world.

Maybe you're retired. Your company has rejected you for further employment. But God has chosen to utilize you to do some amazing things for those in need. You're not "retired," you are now working in a more full time capacity for God.

Maybe you have some physical impairment that hinders you for doing lots of things that others can do. Yet in God's redemptive hands, your immobility, or your weakness has become God's strength as God uses your time and your creativity and your compassion in behalf of others.

I once had a man in one of my churches that more than anything wanted to be mayor of our town. He served on just about every volunteer board and committee in town as part of his strategy to be elected mayor. He labored particularly hard in every undertaking for our town, singlehandedly pushing for new programs for the homeless, marshalling all of his buddies to turn a dilapidated lot into a playground for the kids.

And yet, when the city election came, he was defeated. Too liberal, some said. Too ambitious, said others.

He was heartbroken at his loss, took it as a personal putdown. And yet, his loss was our church's good fortune. In one month, with his great gifts for organization, he reorganized our church clothes closet and food pantry, making them more efficient and effective. Next thing, he became chair of our church trustees and led a complete renovation of our aging building.

I didn't think of this verse at the time, but I wish I had, though I'm not sure how he might have taken it. *The stone rejected by the builders*

*is now the main foundation stone!
This has happened because of the LORD;
it is astounding in our sight!*

I didn't say that God caused the man's political defeat in the election. I'm not saying that God engineered the man's great disappointment. I am saying that a redemptive, active God transformed that

man's great loss into a great gift for his church and community. It is astounding.

Something about this God loves to take the rejection of others, as well as the loss we suffer because of the rejection of others, and turn that loss into the foundation for a fresh, new building project accomplished by God.

As we walk through the rest of this holiest week of the church year, I want you to remember that: "The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone.... This has happened because of the Lord."

This week we shall witness Jesus rejected by the very ones he came to save. We shall see him treated cruelly and shamefully, rejected by those in power—religious and political—and eventually rejected by the crowd. His own disciples will cower before Jesus' enemies and then will flee into the darkness.

All of these human actions of rejection and betrayal will make all the more remarkable God's actions at the end of this week. God will be revealed, by God's work to be the God who loves to work good out of our bad. Wonder of wonders, we shall see that the stone which the builders rejected will be used by God to make a fresh start with God's building project called humanity.

I hope that you will be present for the round of services here this Holy Week. As the psalmist says, this is an astounding thing to see.

Relating the text:

I walked in the construction area where stones were being selected and then carefully cut for restoration work on the National Cathedral in Washington. Each stone was laid out in the yard and each marked with a series of numbers for exact placement where it was needed.

"At every step along the way," explained the stonemason, we must check the stone to be sure there are no flaws or imperfections that might later lead the stone to deteriorate and weaken. Even when a stone has been selected for cutting, after it has actually been hewn we might find some inner imperfection and the stone must be cast aside."

I looked over at a pile of stones, some cut, some not. "Are those the rejected stones?" I asked.

"Yep," he replied.

"What's to be done with all those stones that were judged to be unusable for the fabric of the cathedral?" I asked.

"Not much you can do with them," he said. "We'll hope to get someone to cart them off and maybe they'll be pulverized into gravel and used in road construction or something less grand than this cathedral."

In all our institutional work and renovation, we begin with the assumption that God is the initiator and the chief protagonist of the church.

A major question for Christians, not only as we enter the events of Holy Week but as we walk through life is, What is God up to now?

How shall we characterize our "now"? For some time it has been popular to construe our situation as that of exile. I have found the exilic metaphor to be most helpful in my own ministry. Mainline Protestantism has been sidelined, marginalized in the culture we thought we owned. I was trained to keep house at the glorious Temple in the center of the Holy City; most of my ministry has been attempted restoration, renovation, and evacuation of decaying outposts in the hinterland. We Methodist bishops couldn't get an invite to the White House, even under Obama, even though we begged. North American culture has done us in—and after all we did for North American culture!

The culture has disenfranchised us. Yet I am probing a deeper, perhaps more threatening thought. What if God is active in the disestablishment of my church? I hope that I never lose the shock that many of Israel's greatest prophets, like Jeremiah, interpreted Israel's tragic exile, not as something brought about by bad Babylonians but rather as punishment that was orchestrated by the good God who had created Israel. Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple in ruin, God's Chosen forced into Babylonian exile as God's will? Ought God's elect pay such a heavy price because of their election?

Might God have a hand in our relinquishments? Dare we think that God might be taking us into the wilderness, not only to chastise us but also to free us from our idols? Is our theology robust enough to consider the possibility that the steeples of mainline, exilic Protestantism are falling as part of the providence of God?

And if we dare that most immoderate theological thought, how then should we live?

In response to Hauerwas's and my *Resident Aliens* call for the American church to see itself in exile as an alternative polis, critics often quoted back to us Jeremiah 29:4-7. "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile...." Settle in, settle down, and make peace with the empire. Find some nice Babylonian sons for your daughters to marry. Put aside the songs of Zion and learn to sing imperial praise choruses. Babylonia isn't so bad once you get used to it.

To be honest, more of my ministry is in line with this call to settle in and settle down in a strange land. Knowing something of church history, I'm sure that some of our frantic attempts to make the church relevant to the crises and tastes of the present age are the equivalent of Jeremiah 29:4-7. I expect that some of my rants against Trumpian America, some of my concern over what my church is going to do about sexual orientation issues, some of my fascination with church growth strategies indicate my rather pitiful attempts to lay aside the fierce Gospel and instead to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." Sometimes it's easier to mount a march against our impious President than to help a few more of my church members summon the guts to follow Jesus.

What's God up to now? That's the question that confronts the church as Jesus bounces into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey or as Jesus bounces into your church this Sunday on the back of a biblical psalm.



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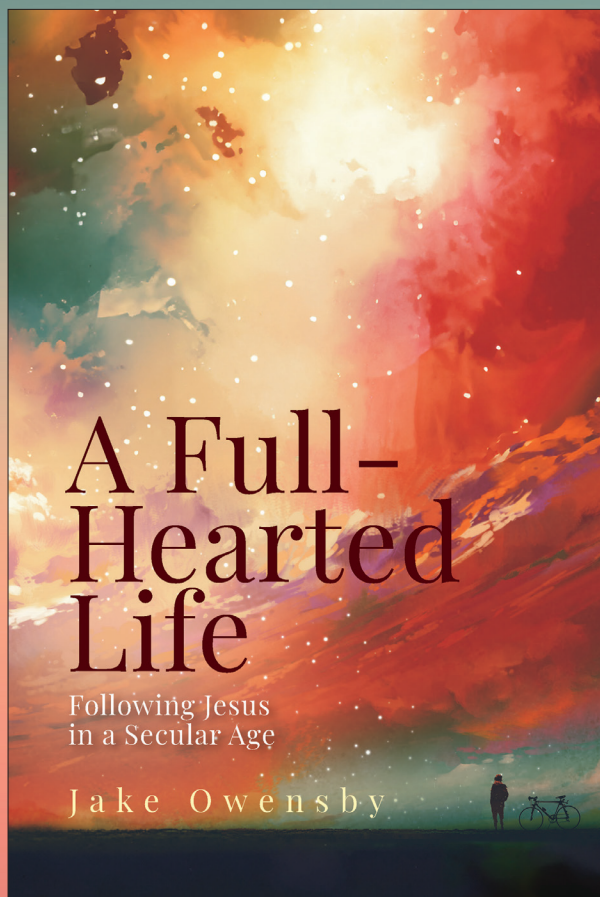
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