

## Prisoners of Hope

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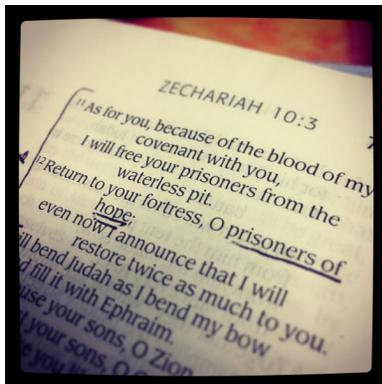
Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

Zechariah 9:9-12/ Luke 19:28-40

Jesus smiled and waved from the back of his donkey on that first Palm Sunday, but the fact that Friday was ahead must have nagged at him. Where would all his fans be when the cheers turned to jeers?

Evidence of these mixed emotions can be found in Matthew's Gospel, which says that Jesus, as he topped the hill above Jerusalem, paused, looked out over the city of God, and wept. With a voice breaking with discouragement, he lamented:

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you; how I have longed to gather you together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you would have none of it.*



Palm Sunday is a day of rejoicing and triumph, but it also holds deep sorrow and discouragement for Jesus. The truth is that most of our life is spent in this tension between triumph and despair; between hope and discouragement. That is why the prophet calls us "prisoners of hope."

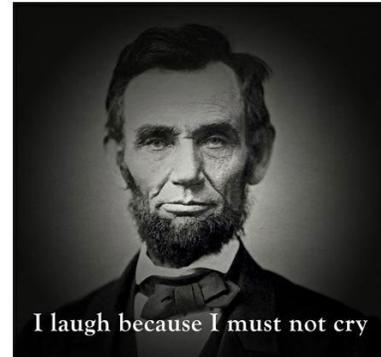
This morning, I want us to look at how Jesus was able to keep from being overcome by the downward pull of disappointment in the face of the fact that even those closest to him never really understood him.

Jesus knew this and paused on the hill that day and wept, but he didn't just sit there weeping. He pushed on, keeping the faith and finishing the course. So, what might we learn from Jesus about how to keep from being immobilized by discouragement?



A myriad of studies shows that although we are living in the most prosperous and healthy era in human history, there still is an epidemic of anxiety, depression, and despair. You may find yourself struggling with it, and, if you are not right now one thing you can count on: **you will.**

That may be the place to start: recognize that you are a part of a noble company. Read any biography of any great person and the one common denominator is that they all suffered times of defeat and periods of discouragement. Today, Abraham Lincoln would take medication. In his day, however, he had to struggle unaided against his despair, but it certainly did not disqualify him from great service.



Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. He had come to his own, and they did not recognize him. They still were looking for a vengeful Messiah who would come in triumph and overthrow Rome and reward them, but Jesus came as a servant leader, longing to



gather and protect them like a mother hen would. Then, as now, the crowds seek a religion of personal reward.

Apparently, it is only when we weep for those who misunderstand us that we embody the spirit of Jesus. But, if that is the case, how do we keep our souls tender without succumbing to discouragement?

I am indebted to Bruce Thielemann, who was, for a long time, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh for this advice:

- **First, we should take a short look what discourages us.**

Notice I said a “short look.” Yes, it is dangerous to ignore what our enemies are saying or doing, but it is equally dangerous to invest too much attention there. It will take over your soul.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu warned us to take care when we fight monsters that we do not become a monster. The truth is other people are rarely the monsters we’d like to pretend they are. Most of our real monsters live inside us, which is why we must seek answers within.



What we give our attention to we also give our power to. We must beware not to so focus on the negative forces that we **become** a negative force. We should not ignore our problems, but, if we obsess about them, we can make them invincible.

There is joke I like to tell about this, but no one ever gets it:

*There was this farmer who built a barn, but it burned down. Then he built another one, but it blew down. Finally, he decided to build a barn out of bricks. Thousands and thousands of bricks. The walls, the floor, even the roof were all made of bricks. When he was done with this monumental edifice, he discovered that he had exactly one brick left over. He stood there looking at that brick. And what do you think he did with it? He threw it over his shoulder and walked away.*



See, you don't think it's funny either. I think it is funny that we sit here thinking about that one brick. Too often we obsess about what ends up being a very small part of the ultimate picture.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He acknowledged his feelings and owned them, but he didn't call off the parade and spend the day crying. Jesus took a short honest look at the problem.

Then we need to take a **narrow look at ourselves**. Notice I said a "narrow look" because we need to be prejudice on our behalf. I don't mean we avoid taking responsibility for our part in the mess of life, but it does no one any good to set up camp and dwell there.

One thing we all have in common is that when we lose, we can feel like losers, but the only losers are those who blame others for their losses because **you can't fix others**. So, doing that surrenders hope.

We must acknowledge our mistakes and take responsibility, but we cannot let our setbacks define us. We also must remember the victories that have been ours and the work we still have to do.

Several years ago, I was asked to write an article about becoming a great leader. The first word I wrote down was “resilience.” Every single woman or man who has done great things also suffered great defeats **AND** came back.



Jesus didn't just sit on the Mount of Olives weeping. No, even though his closest disciples still didn't get it, Jesus remembered the gifts that were his and all that was left for him to do:

- There was a temple only he could cleanse.
- There was a supper only he could host.
- There was a cross only he could bear.
- And there was a death only he could conquer.

Rather than letting discouragement disable him, Jesus grieved but then moved on to do what he could and left the results to God. There were no guarantees he would succeed, but **trying** would do more good than **crying**.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the shouting and waving branches only highlighted that he had failed to persuade them to choose the Realm of God over the way of Empire. Still, he was a *prisoner of hope*, so he kept trying with the very last breaths of his life.

Jesus' example offers one final word of advice when we face discouragement, and that is we should take a **long** look at God.

- *Take a short look at what's discouraging you*, but don't obsess.
- *Take a narrow look at yourself*, be prejudice for yourself.
- *And take a long look at God*, the real source of all hope.

Discouragement to the point of despair is the attitude of a functional atheist. If we let our challenges have the last word, then, clearly, we do not believe in God or perhaps we don't think God believes in us. That is why answers must be found within.

Look within and connect with the God who dwells there, the God who lives within you, believes in you, and is ready to help you recover the purpose for which you were sent here. God doesn't give you all the answers, but God's Spirit blows on the spark of hope that can keep you moving forward.

*A woman is riding on a train with her little dog. She loved that dog so much she bought it a ticket so it would have its own seat. However, the man riding in the seat across from the dog lights up a cigar. The smoke drifts into the dog's face, and soon it is coughing and wheezing.*



*"Excuse me sir, but would you mind putting out your cigar, it is bothering my little dog." The man just ignored her and went right on puffing and reading his paper. After a few more miles the dog is on its side panting, so the woman tried again. This time the man said, "Madam, I paid for my seat and you paid for yours. You do what you want to in your seat, and I'll do what I want to in mine," and he puffed away.*

*By now, the white dog is turning blue, so, in desperation, the woman reaches over and takes the cigar and throws it out the window. Furious, the man picks up the little dog and throws it out the window. Well, the woman is outraged.*

*The train is pulling into the station, and the man is getting off with the woman trailing behind him, screaming and beating on his back. As they step down onto the platform, here comes the little dog, and guess what it has in its mouth ...*

That's right. The brick the farmer threw over his shoulder.

Now, you didn't laugh at that joke earlier, but it was because you hadn't heard the end of it.

So it is with life. It is always premature to despair because this is not the last chapter. This is not the end of our story, any more than Palm Sunday was the end of Jesus' story. None of us know enough to lose hope because we have not heard the end of our story.



Palm Sunday could have been a great day, and Friday a hopeless tragedy. **Prisoners of Hope** know that Palm Sundays can be deceiving, and Good Fridays can be discouraging, but we won't know how our story ends until we persevere to our own personal Easter morning.

**Amen.**