Well, we’ve all finally made it. Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, after these long 40 days and 40 nights of the season of Lent some of us can’t wait till Lent is over and get on with the season of Easter but we are not there yet. A lot still needs to happen from now until resurrection Sunday next week. Consider this as the ultimate testing of our endurance and our faith. We will get there eventually.

**Theologically what happens during Holy Week encapsulate the much broader story of our human faith journey, as well as our struggle with our relationship with God and with one another.** From the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem to the fall of human beings through the sins of betrayal, fear, and public shame; from the hopeless disappointment and a sense of abandonment at the tomb to the mystery and jubilation of the empty grave, signifying the resurrected Christ. This all happens in the coming week, taking a toll of our human emotion like a roller-coaster ride.

But on this Palm Sunday, I would like to invite us to focus on this visitor who was coming into Jerusalem. Many people might have heard much of him for what he has been doing around the region but knew very little about him. He was a really a stranger among the people who are meeting him for the first time. Many theologians and researchers have pointed out that Jerusalem was really a foreign land for Jesus, that he didn’t really visit the city that many times throughout his life because the center of his ministry was around the region of Galilee and NOT Jerusalem – which is the center of commerce and politic.

Jesus spent much of his ministry days in places where the common people were. He hung out with the fishermen, the peasants, the poor, the sick, or those who are marginalized and abused by the privileged society, not those who are in power politically and religiously in Jerusalem.

As he taught his disciples through his teaching that it wasn’t the rich, the powerful, or the self-proclaimed righteous who needed to hear his message of hope and salvation, but instead it was the poor and those who are marginalized by society who would embrace his message of hope the most. As part of his famous sermon on the mount, aka the Beatitude, he made it clear of who are the people whom God favors.

Jesus said, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Jesus was a nomad living at the mercy of people’s hospitality and charity. He was a stranger among those who came before him whether they are rich, powerful, or they are poor and outcast. The people extended their welcome and hospitality by whatever means that they could find. The people who came out to welcome Jesus probably didn’t have much. They didn’t roll out their royal red-carpet, but instead, they laid down their cloaks on their backs and they waved palms and tree branches in welcoming this visitor from out of town, who would soon to be their king. But this was no ordinary king who ironically came to serve and die, instead of being served and patronized by others. This king came to establish his reign by being mocked, ridiculed, beaten and eventually executed. What kind of king would do such a thing?

Jesus may not have the pedigree and social profile to be the political and military king to rule the people, but he did rule and establish his reign in an unconventional way. He welcomed strangers, the oppressed, the marginalized to be at the center of God’s kingdom.

As we pause to reflect upon Christ’s grand entrance into Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday, we focus upon our relationship with Christ and with one another. Christ exercised his ministry of hospitality by welcoming and accepting others from all spectrums of life. He has also challenged us to welcome and honor others through our own hospitality and welcoming of others. Are we willing to lay down our best cloaks on the dusty road and to let someone and his animal to walk on? It’s easier said than done, isn’t it? But that’s exactly what Christ is challenging us to do – to give a little bit of ourselves in greeting strangers among us and to make them feel safe and welcome as any one of us.

A couple of months ago, an Executive Order was signed by the newly sworn in President that would ban all traveler from a number of predominately Muslim countries in the Middle East. A refugee family from the civil-war torn Syria was anxiously waiting for their flight to America – a flight towards freedom and a new beginning. With the assistance and support from the *Brick Presbyterian Church* in Manhattan, this Syrian refugee family was caught in a state of limbo, not knowing what their future may hold, even though they had all the valid paperwork necessary to enter into the United States as refugees. Not knowing what the fallout of the newly issue Executive Order, they were stranded in Turkey waiting to hear what comes next….certainly they could not go back to their home country in Syria, because there was no home to go back to.

Meantime, more than 6,000 miles away across the Atlantic, there was a 2-bedroom apartment waiting for them in Jersey City, with much donated items of clothing, household necessities, and food, as well as toys for the young children. This was all a part of the American dream that seemed to be shattered overnight with a simple stroke of a pen. Upon hearing that the Executive Order was being put on hold by the court order, this family of five immediately boarded the next flight bound for JFK. They were welcomed by many awaited parishioners from the church, as well as many supporters and strangers whom they have never met but have been praying for them and for their safe arrival into this country, as they begin their new life here in this country.

This Syrian refugee family had nothing but the clothes on their back. They had no home to return to. They were given the opportunity to begin this new life here in this country after having endured what they had gone through back home.

This is the kind of welcome and hospitality that Jesus is challenging us to take on, as we welcomed him into Jerusalem on this day, as stranger, refugee who have no possessions, no money, and no home. Jesus came on a donkey that didn’t even belong to him. Yet, we embraced him for who he was, as the Messiah, the King. We were willing to look beyond our human superficials. As Jesus taught his disciples in the parable of the Talents, *“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The Palm Sunday account also seems to be highly paradoxical by the manner in which a king was welcomed and received. Was this the best of what the people had to offer in order to welcome our next King? But this King was not our ordinary king. He did not expect us to elevate his status….because he didn’t need to. He came down to where his constituents are. He did not need any honorific titles in order to qualify his credentials and mission, because his actions and his deeds were resounding enough. As prophesized by the prophet Isaiah, this new King was to be the fulfillment of God’s promise. He was the *“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

This was the beginning of the new kingship – a new regime. This king came without a royal robe, who did not come with an entourage of horses and chariots. He had no military to defeat any army, nevertheless, he came to spark a new revolution, not so much of a political revolution, but a revolution of the heart….a grassroot movement incited by the repentance of one’s heart.

Jesus came with one mission on his mind…that is to re-establish his father’s throne of grace and humility for all of God’s people once and for all, not in a royal palace or the temple but on the hill of execution – popularly known as the Skull. **Instead of putting on a royal crown of fine jewels and gold, He was presented with a crown of thorns and a robe stained by His own blood.**

As one theologian commented upon this reversal of expectation and the new role of this new King that “**God’s ways are not those of ‘this world.’ Our way is not God’s way. Lordship is defined in terms of servanthood. gentleness, humility, peace, mercy, self-giving and compassion are marks of God’s domain.”[[4]](#footnote-4)**

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the early church in Philippi, he portrayed this beautiful image of Christ, not as a king but as a servant. He was the humbled servant King, who *“though he was in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but [He] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

This was the essence of Christ’s earthly mission - **Emptiness**, **Humbleness**, and **Obedience**. Being “empty” means we must be willing to deprive of ourselves by letting go of what we have. We cast our care and worry upon God and God alone. Even though He was a King, he became a servant and a slave to all. He reduced himself to be the lowest of the lowest, so that he may relate to us all. He gave us a new commandment to follow, *“love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Why? Because by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Christ’s triumphant entry and journey to the Cross was a selfless act of obedience to the Father. His act of obedience is a sign of his humility, as he welcomed us into his embrace of his outstretched arms. Likewise, we ought to extend our arms to embrace one another through our ministry of hospitality.

This was God’s overall plan for humanity that Christ must suffer and experience the cruelty of OUR death. The Cross that He was bore on His shoulder was not His but OURS. The suffering that He endured and the death that He died was also OURS! We should’ve been the one up there and not Christ. He was just a visitor sent to us all.

As we journey through the final leg to the cross this week, may we walk in humility with our brother Jesus step-in-step, stride-for-stride till the end, instead of walking away and abandoning him, and claiming our stranger status with him. The weight of the cross is too much for Christ alone to bear, but he is the only one who can bear the weight of our sins all upon his shoulder. May we feel the agony and the deep anxiety as Christ experienced upon his final days.

This is all part of God’s doing and God’s will for His Son and His people. No one else could do this except Christ, NO ONE! He must do this ALL ALONE for our sake and for the sake of humanity.

But at the very least on this Palm Sunday, we can all pitch in to do our parts by lightening his load by demonstrating his love and welcoming other strangers among us. We love because God has first loved us. Let us spread across our cloaks by laying down the best of what we have to offer in welcoming Christ through our hospitality.

“*Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the Highest!”* In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Matthew 5:3-11* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Matthew 25:34-36, 40* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Isaiah 9:6-7* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Duke, James O. *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, p. 154-156 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Philippians 2:5-8* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *John 13:34-35* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)