“What Do I Know of Holy?”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is Holy Week -- We mark it by worshipping together today, and again on Thursday evening at 7:00 when we remember the Lord’s Last Supper with his disciples and the gradual dimming of the light in a service called Tenebrae. We will gather again together at 7:00 on Friday, the day we call Good, and experience together the words of the Passion of our Christ, our God. This is Holy Week, one week in the year that we set aside as that most worthy to be set aside, because this is the week in which we mark God’s willingness to sacrifice his Son for us. Jesus was tried, was killed, was buried, and in a miracle far beyond what we can claim in our understanding of earthly things, was resurrected.

So, what is this thing we call Holy? And what about that other H word we sang in our earlier hymn? In the anthem I will sing with the help of Bill Schubeck later in the service, the writer asks, “Are you Fire, are you Fury, are you sacred are you beautiful?” Yeah, that’s the question. Just who are you, Jesus, even today? Do we let you be holy? Are you not “holier than thou,” but certainly holier than anything else to which we give our allegiance and our time? And is this why we would cry out to you, “Hosanna!,” which has come to mean a cry of adoration, for blessedness, but has its root in a plea to save. What does it do to our worship to know that we paraded around the sanctuary, crying out, “God, save us!”? I don’t know about you, but speaking for myself, I have been praying this way for quite a while now.

This week, I saw, not for the first time, a video clip of an amazing individual. It begins with Nick Vujicik standing in a soccer goal with the ball visible on the penalty line. Someone shoots it hard at the goal, and it passes Nick without his moving toward it at all. He shouts, “I wasn’t ready,” with a smile. It’s no wonder that he doesn’t move to make the save; he doesn’t have any arms or legs. It is the beginning of a story that shows the example he provides for countless people as he shares his story. His life is full of joy and of achievement. Nick Vujicik is set apart from other people—not only because of his physical differences, but primarily because of the way he has faced them with humor and met other people with love. I would call this a holy difference.

Maybe our questions about who Jesus is and was are what allow us not to take this week quite so seriously; maybe even not take our faith quite so seriously. After all, Jesus, who is our Lord and our God, doesn’t enter Jerusalem, the holy city, on a fine steed. He rides in on a donkey. Sure, that fulfills scripture, and those devout Jews in his company might have made that connection. But the man arrives on a donkey. In your mind’s eye, can you see them kind of galumphing in the way that donkeys do? Can you hear it braying in your mind’s ear? Now that’s the way to win friends and influence people, isn’t it? That smacks of holy, doesn’t it?

My sarcasm is not real here, not entirely, but you see, there was so much that was intentionally ironic about Jesus’ life and death. There is everything about Jesus’ life and death that turns upside down our regular expectations, including about what is holy. What has value, asks Jesus? Love, and peace; respect and devotion—to God and to each other. Do you know, on the other side of the city, Pilate had his own procession, with all of the empire following along. We’ve heard about a desire for grand processions, and in the face of that, in a manner that pokes fun at this kind of kingly processions that was demanded of the people under empire, Jesus and his followers point instead to God, to what service to the one true Lord may be.

We didn’t hear from Luke this morning, but Luke’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem highlights so much of what we know about Jesus’ unique ministry. In this account, there are no palms; there aren’t even any hosannas. Yes, his disciples lay out their cloaks for Jesus to pass over. And yes, they can’t keep themselves from singing—words from Zechariah, in pronouncing a king, and peace in heaven. With a big sigh, we may ask, peace in heaven? But today, we may ask how that helps us when we want a *present* holy; when we want a *present* peace.

So, the question is how much are we trying to contribute to a sense of holy and a sense of peace today, right now? Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, entered the holy city of Jerusalem on the most humble of animals, a donkey. I wonder when was the last time any one of us directly sought that which humbles us.

To recognize something as holy requires that we also recognize our own deferential place. This week, in humming through the words and the sometimes-haunting melody of the offertory anthem, I wondered if I should be moved to my knees in the presence of the holy; in the presence of God. Shouldn’t we all be? Maybe our knees hurt; maybe after bending, they wouldn’t allow us to stand back up very well or at all. But I think you know what I mean. When is the last time we were moved to prostrate ourselves to the holiness of God? Or are we so full of ourselves and our busy lives that we forget what is holy around us? Have we forgotten God’s original greatness and Jesus’ amazing love and sacrifice? Then, if we feel like that may be true, how can we remember?

There is nothing in this life more holy than Jesus, and nothing that has occurred that is more holy than what happened in this Holy Week. To think about this only in the sense of what the words mean, we can look back to the original biblical use of the word in Hebrew, as we did with hosanna. Josh Benner writes, “When we use the word holy, as in a holy person, we usually associate this with a righteous or pious person. If we use this concept when interpreting the word holy in the Hebrew Bible then we are misreading the text as this is not the meaning of the Hebrew word qadosh. Qadosh literally means "to be set apart for a special purpose".” Jesus’ purpose was like no other before him, nor since him. Jesus was set apart to save us. He allowed himself to be crucified, somehow treasonous while maintaining loyalty to the Lord, God, *he* recognized.

There is nothing in this life more holy than Jesus, nothing so set apart for a special purpose. And do you know that we really are called to be holy? Remember how we’re using the word now: We are set apart for a special purpose. We are set apart to worship Jesus. This makes us distinct from increasing numbers of people. Sure, the stones may cry out if we don’t profess our faith, but why don’t we? Why don’t we, on this Holy Week, set apart for a distinct purpose, bend to our knees in humble gratitude for the greatest gift we’ve ever received? So, let’s do it! Let’s sing our songs louder than ever before (We can start with the next hymn!). You know why? Because we are loved more than we have ever been loved before. We are loved, each day, by God who came right here to us to show us how to live—distinct from other people, even while living with other people. Distinct from those who parade in regal processions on the other side of town or of our country, in the kind of subversion that Jesus incited. So, as we worship, we can do so frequently this week, humbly, bowing before God who not only made us, but continues to save us; who continues to want to be in relationship with us.

Let’s be holy this week, really! Set yourself apart! Let’s be the separated few that come before God in this most holy of times and remember that we are called—called to the same actions that Christ incited—and I am using that word intentionally. We are called to respond to this greatest of gifts! We are called to that which is holy: God, in Jesus, who died for us so that God could put an end to death itself. And then, as we move through the week, let’s continue on *our* quest for holiness—in Jesus when we celebrate His resurrection; and in us as we celebrate our resurrection in Him—every day of our lives. In each of us is the gift of life, thanks be to God. Let us celebrate in holiness all the gifts of God that inspire us to what we may call Christian distinction; distinction that we know by our mercy, humility, empathy, compassion, and love. Amen