***WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?***

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Texts: Mark 11:1-11 and Zechariah 9:9-10

It was just a year ago that we began worshiping together virtually via Facebook Live each week, something we had never done before and had not anticipated doing quite so soon. In the space of a few pandemic days Mike and Sarah Riddell and Sarah Wolf figured out how to make it happen with an iphone and a little bit of magic, and away we boldly went into the future where no Covenant service had gone before. I remember climbing up into this pulpit that day, looking out at a largely empty sanctuary, and thinking, “*This is what it must have felt like for Mister Rogers all those years*,” talking to folks you could not see, trusting they were there, somewhere out there, wherever *there* might be. So here we are one year later, still anxious to get back together in person, but also grateful for your participation from afar, and for some of you, we know that *afar* truly is far!

Why are we doing this? Because we are disciples of the risen Christ who are determined to worship together even when we cannot be together. Yogi Berra once said of his relationship with his wife, “*We have a good time together even when we’re not together*.” So it is for us. Technology which, as Mike Riddell says, is great except when it isn’t, has enabled us to be together to sing God’s praise, hear God’s word, and lift to God our prayers even when we’re not together. Whether you are a long-time member or a new member or not a member at all, you are part of our Covenant family by your participation with us today or any of these days. That is why we do this – not just because there is a pandemic, but because in this pandemic we have found a way to continue being church together, a way that will continue long after this pandemic is over and we have returned to the pews!

Some years ago, we helped to resettle a refugee family from Bosnia. When they first arrived, the Ljubovics spoke a limited amount of English, so it took some explaining to help them understand that the apartment we had furnished for them was theirs; all the furnishings were theirs to keep. They were surprised that we would do this for total strangers who were not necessarily going to be part of our church. As we were talking in the park one day shortly after their arrival, Mito said to me, “*Why do you do this?*” I responded, “*We do this because we love Jesus and Jesus calls us to love one another*.” “*I want to learn more of this Jesus*,” he responded. And so he did.

*Why are you doing this?* It is a question for all of us to answer day to day. Why do you do what you do? Some things we know we should NOT be doing, and that is what confession and repentance and forgiveness are all about. Some of the things we do as disciples of Jesus are not things the world necessarily thinks are good ideas, like forgiving again and again and again, loving enemies and praying for those who persecute us, taking time to worship each week and to give to the church when the money and time could be used for more entertaining purposes. We do these things, not because we have to, but because as Jesus’ disciples we follow wherever he leads us and this is where he leads us, this is what he calls us to do and who he calls us to be – people who love God with all that we are and love our neighbors as ourselves. We do these things because he asks us, tells us, commands us to do so. That is why we worship; that is why we serve; that is why we do what we do.

That question posed to us – *Why are you doing this?* – was asked on that first Palm Sunday as well. It was asked of disciples as they began to untie and lead away the colt Jesus would ride into Jerusalem. As you heard from Mark’s Gospel, this Palm Sunday parade was not a spontaneous event; it didn’t just happen to happen. It was choreographed by Jesus as he approached the sister cities of Bethphage and Bethany on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. It is only a little over a mile and a half from those sister cities in the east to the walled city limits of Jerusalem to the west – about the same distance as from here to the Woodrow Wilson Birthplace. Like the stretch of Coalter Street from here to there, it is a rollercoaster ride on the Jericho Road that links them, a rocky, dusty road well-traveled by merchants and pilgrims alike.

For three years Jesus had walked everywhere he went – along seashores, up mountains, into towns, and across the countryside – but as he neared Jerusalem, Jesus decided he needed a ride, not because he was tired, but because he wanted to make a statement with his entry into the holy city. So, as you heard, he sent two disciples into the twin cities of Bethphage and Bethany with explicit instructions:

*Go into the village and as soon as you enter it you will find a colt tied, a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, “Why are you doing this?” say, “The Lord needs it and will send it back immediately.”*

He didn’t just say, “*Go into town and see if you can borrow a donkey*.” He was very specific about where they should go and what they would find and what would be said. When they went, the colt was waiting for them just as he said, and the question asked was just as he said, and the colt was provided just as he said. One is tempted to wonder if there was some code in that question and response: *Why are you doing this?*

*The Lord needs it.*

And perhaps with a nod of the head or a wink of the eye those standing near the colt sent the disciples on their way with the colt in tow. Or perhaps Jesus foresaw what was to happen before it happened and knew what no one else knew about the colt and the question and the events to follow. We don’t know. What we do know is that Jesus planned how he would enter the city – and key to the plan was the response to that question, “*Why are you doing this?*”

The disciples did as Jesus told them and brought back the colt which Jesus would ride into history on Palm Sunday. What seemed like theft or at least the impermissible purloining of a pony was in fact faithful obedience. The disciples knew the proper words to say in response to the question, but their actions spoke louder. “*Why are you doing this?*” Because the Lord needs it, and we are obeying our Lord.

It is difficult to be Jesus’ disciple if you are unwilling to obey him and do what he asks you to do and follow where he asks you to follow and be the person Jesus asks you to be. James Madison once said, "*The duty to obey God precedes all claims of the state or any political authority,*” and Jesus would add, “*or any claims of any peers or any parents or any politician or any church or employer or anyone except God*.” Obedience is our first responsibility as disciples. Sometimes that is pretty easy as when Jesus says, “Love your neighbor” and you like your neighbor anyway. But it gets harder when he says, “Love your neighbor” and your neighbor is a jerk. It is easy to be a disciple when Jesus asks you to do what YOU want to do, but it gets harder when Jesus asks you to do what you don’t want to do – as when he says, “*Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.*” Being a disciple doesn’t mean following Jesus some of the time or most of the time. It is a commitment to follow Jesus all of the time. And while even the twelve did not follow perfectly – remember Peter’s threefold denial – it is nevertheless what disciples are called to do or at least try to do as best we can. For two disciples on this Palm Sunday that meant going and getting a young donkey for Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem even when suspicious others stopped to ask, “*Why are you doing this*?”

The same question might be asked of Jesus on that ride. *Why are you doing this, Jesus?* Why ride into Jerusalem? Why encourage the crowd to rain hosannas upon your head and build up royal expectations of you? Why taunt the religious authorities who are just looking for a reason to stop you? Why not slip into the city, preach and teach and heal a little, and then head back to safer ground in the country? *Why are you doing this, Jesus?*

Jesus was doing what he did on that Palm Sunday to claim the mantle of messiah. The prophet Zechariah prophesied that a king would come into Jerusalem humbly, riding on a young donkey, to establish God’s reign. When Caesar came to town, he rode a prancing white steed. Perched on the back of that young colt Jesus fulfilled Zechariah’s prophecy and declared himself a different kind of king, not one who would establish his kingdom with violence like Caesar, but one who would establish God’s kingdom with love. Those who did not know the prophecy, didn’t notice. But those who knew Zechariah’s words recognized Jesus’ ride into the holy city on the back of that colt as a royal decree of his divine calling. Jesus was riding in as king, but he was also riding to his death. Each step of the donkey brought him one step closer to the cross. Yet Jesus rode on anyway, obedient to the God who had sent him to save the world. That is what he was doing when he rode into Jerusalem!

As we enter this Holy Week on our way to the cross and empty tomb, Jesus is asking us: *Why are YOU doing this?* Why are you taking time to remember Jesus this holy week? Why do you claim to be his disciple when you live like you live and do the things you do? He rides into Jerusalem to shouts of hosanna, literally “save us”, but those cries will quickly give way to shouts of “crucify him”, yet still he rides on. *He will suffer for your sins to bring you to God*, says Peter, yet still he rides on. He will have nails driven through his hands and feet and be ridiculed as he hangs on the cross, yet still he rides on. He knows what is coming, and still he rides on – for me, for you. What then are you doing for him? Imagine that question being asked of you throughout this week, at home, at school, at work, in your most faithful moments and in those moments of which you are less proud. Imagine it being asked of you, not by some stranger, but by Jesus. *Why are you doing this?* May your answer, spoken not just with your lips but with your life, be this:

*Lord, I am trying to do what you want me to do and to be who you want me to be and to follow where you want me to follow. I am trying to be your disciple; I am trying the best that I can*!”

For, that is why we do what we do this day and this Holy Week and every day, day after day after day. Amen