



LESSONS for LIFE

March 16, 2008 7:00 p.m

PALM SUNDAY

WHAT DID JESUS DO?

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Matthew 21 verses 6 to 11 reads: *The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus sat on them. The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and the crowds that followed him were shouting, 'Hosanna to the son of David!' Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Hosanna in the highest heaven! When he made his entrance into Jerusalem the whole city was shaken and people were asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were answering, "This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee."*

This sermon series is titled, Happiness Now from a book of the same name written by Robert Holden. During this series we have taken a look at some of the key principles of this book. We began by talking about how happiness is something we search for, and that's the problem. Instead of searching outside of us for happiness we need to look inside. If you remember, I started this sermon series by doing a little funny thing by taking off my glasses and placing them here (hooked into the top of his shirt) and saying, "Where are my glasses? Where did my glasses go? Where can I find them? And as long as I looked for my glasses outside I won't find them; I have to look here – inside. The same is true for happiness. This morning I joked about how, when I was getting ready, I had one of those moments – and there's always a funny side and a serious side to most things in life: the serious thing is that my Mum has Alzheimer's and she is really deteriorating in her health and most of the stuff I've read says that most of the adult children of parents with Alzheimer's are always really worried about their own memory. Does anyone else here have a parent with Alzheimer's? Well, you know what I'm talking about. Every time we forget something we worry about the fact that maybe it's starting with us! So, I was worrying about it and fretting a lot and finally my doctor said, "Brent, get over it. This is driving me crazy. I'm going to send you to a neurologist just to get you to calm down." So I went to a neurologist for tests and finally he said to me, "Brent, there's nothing wrong with you other than the fact that you're aging!" I wasn't sure that helped but he gave an example. He said, "Brent, if you mislaid your car keys and you don't know where they are, that's not a problem; that's an everyday occurrence for someone your age, so don't worry about it. However, when you have your car keys in your hand and you can't remember what they're for, then that's a problem." This morning when I was getting ready for church I put my Madonna mike on and was getting ready and putting on my robes and then I thought, 'Oh, where's my microphone?' And so I went looking for my microphone and then I realized that I already had it on! Not a problem, but if I have it on and think I'm Madonna – that's a problem!! (laughter).



LESSONS for LIFE

If we're looking for happiness outside of ourselves we may experience a moment or two of it here and there, but if happiness is to be a way of life, not just an event but a way of life, not just an exception but the rule, Jesus said the scriptures say, *Rejoice always, rejoice always I say rejoice*. Rejoicing is meant to be a way of life and yet so many people only experience it as the exception. So one of the reasons we gather together as a faith community is to learn how we can celebrate more of life. Then we took a look in the second sermon in this series about how happiness is a set of attitudes not a set of circumstances; it's not about what has happened to you good or bad, it's a set of attitudes. Attitudes begin with the primary one remembering that each of us is created in the image of God: God in us and God through us for our world; and that when we were born God places within each one of us love and peace and joy and those three things are the essence of who we are. Now this sermon series is tough news for many people. When we read the scriptures sometimes we say at the end of the reading of the scriptures, *These are sacred readings. May they comfort us and strengthen us and challenge us*. Faith communities are not just about warm, fuzzy feelings; that is important and hopefully it happens regularly, but it's also about challenging us and stirring us up and making us uncomfortable in those places where we've settled into dysfunction and many of us have our own dysfunctional ways of behaving; and one of the dysfunctions is when we take and we blame the world, blame God, blame circumstances, blame other people for our happiness. Love and peace and joy are the essence of who you are and in you want to experience happiness as a way of life it's your responsibility to reconnect with those things, no matter what the circumstances are. Circumstances can influence but not determine your happiness. So there will be external circumstances, devastating circumstances sometimes. We talked about death; we talked about disease to those close to us and to ourselves; things that happen; and those external circumstances, positive or negative can influence us but they are not the deciding factors. We can live with the loss while we can focus on the gift. We can experience sadness and happiness; we can move through sadness but we don't get stuck there, for our essence is happiness. Last Sunday we talked about not the external circumstances but the internal circumstances and in particular we talked about our self-talk, about all that nattering that happens all the time. I keep thinking it's John, but it's not! He's not here, so I can say that. All of this self-talk that goes on in our heads all the time and most of the self-talk – if you could record it and play it back to yourself – most of that self-talk is either about guilt or judgment. It is; it's true. Psychologists have studied it and questioned people and have said, "Okay, what are you thinking right now? Record it, record it, record it. Most of your self-talk is about guilt, about mistakes that you think you've made or about a standard someone else has set for you or rules that someone else has made for you that really don't apply to you, that you could never live up to, so therefore you feel guilty. Or it's about judgment, about judging yourself not good enough because of a mistake you've made or judging other people around you as not good enough and if you want to experience more happiness we have to shift that self-talk away from guilt and judgment and instead shift that self-talk to gratitude and to goodness; to gratitude and to goodness.

So today is Palm Sunday. The reading that Randi read for us – quoted at the beginning of this sermon – is the Palm Sunday reading of when Jesus entered Jerusalem. You can think of it as being a caravan in a sense of what's happening and all of a sudden you've



LESSONS for LIFE

got this great thing happening in the city and there's this great commotion and people are looking and saying, "What is this thing that is happening. Is this a parade? What's going on? Is this a demonstration? What's happening?" And they look and they hear and they see that it is Jesus, the one who's been healing and performing all the miracles; the one who's been talking of a new kind of faith, who has been stirring things up; the one who has got the religious right really ticked off, really upset. Palm Sunday.

So tonight we want to talk about how Jesus really handled the ups and downs of life. The religious leaders, the religious right – just before this reading – had tried to arrest Jesus. They wanted to stone him but he was able to get away, and then he heard that a friend of his, Lazarus, had died and that the family of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, had wanted Jesus to come and be with them and Jesus said, "I have to go and be with them." And his disciples said, "Don't go, are you crazy? Don't go. They're going to stone you" And Jesus said, "I have got to go to Jerusalem." That's the first key for us about living our lives and how Jesus handled it. Jesus decided that he was not going to live a fear-based life. So many of our decisions we decide are based on fear: being afraid to try a new relationship, being afraid to try a new job, being afraid to speak up, to speak out or try something new or different; being afraid to break out of and try new patterns in our lives. Jesus challenges us to go to Jerusalem, to not stay away because of fear; to not live a life where you make decisions based on fear but live a faith-based life: faith in yourself, faith in the future and faith in God and faith that it will be okay, that God will help you to get through it. Now theologians disagree a lot about whether Jesus knew what was going to happen to him. Some think he did know, others that he did not. I think he kind of did have an idea, which means that when he faced the betrayal, when he was accused of things, when he was attacked by people Jesus could have so easily shied away, stayed away, lived a fear-based life, but instead he went to Jerusalem. You know the early Christian church grew very very quickly in the early centuries and historians, when they look back at the early Christian church, they try to say, "What happened? How could the early Christian faith, go from a small little group into all of a sudden becoming hundreds of thousands of people spreading so quickly around the world? What is this about?" As phenomena they studied it and one of the key reasons they said was because the early Christians were people who were not afraid of death; and so they would stand up to injustice; but more importantly they would go into risky situations to help. When there was a disease spreading over an area, a plague going over an area – where other people would stay away for fear they would die – the early Christians would be quick to go. They weren't afraid to go. They were eager to help and because they were living on faith and not fear it really impressed people. People said, "Look at those Christians. They risk it to be here to help."

As word got around about Jesus and how healings were happening more and more people were gathering and there were more and more needs. If you read the scriptures very carefully it is very interesting because it says when Jesus was surrounded by all of these people he healed many but not all. Jesus walked away from the needs because Jesus had to take time away to pray and be renewed and to reconnect and to go back out and to heal again. Now just imagine, just imagine if Jesus reached out and healed you how excited you would be and your family would be and you'd want to praise Jesus and thank him; and just imagine if Jesus left and you're still there and that day you



LESSONS for LIFE

weren't healed. Just imagine how you'd feel, especially if you'd taken a family member or someone else there for healing. Just imagine how disappointed you'd be. So here's Jesus, knowing he has the power to heal, looking around at the crowd: some are healed but not all, and he had to walk away. He had to rest, he had to be renewed for the next day. Praise from some, criticism from others. When Jesus did that he could say there is happiness nowhere to be found. Think of that word, NOWHERE. There it is (the word appeared on the screen in the Sanctuary). Happiness is NOWHERE. See it in your mind: happiness is nowhere. Now, before the slide is changed I want you to do something a little bit different. Jesus could have given up. He could have said, "Look at all the needs. The religious right are out to kill me. My own disciples don't get it. My mother wants to take me home. She keeps coming and saying and she gets my brothers to come with the crowds and say, "Come on home with us. We think you're going crazy. We want to protect you." And there are thousands of people coming for help. He could easily have said Happiness is nowhere. Now, before you change the slide take a look at that word NOWHERE. Put a little space after that third letter. What do you see? Happiness is NOW HERE. All it takes is just a little bit of space to change it from happiness is nowhere and despair to happiness is now here. This is what Robert Holden is saying and this is what Jesus is saying: that all it takes is a little bit of space, space the size of a mustard seed; just a little bit of space and if you will give God and faith a little bit of space then you can see that it is not happiness is nowhere but instead it is that happiness is now here for your choosing, for your accepting, for yourself and for others. Jesus said – when they kept saying give us signs, get God to work, Jesus said, *The kingdom, the dominion, the realm of God is already here.* It's within you, it's among you. We spend so much of our time trying to reach up, to reach out to a God to rescue us when God is saying *I've already placed the keys to your own rescuing within you.* Don't look there, look here (holding his hand on his heart) for that. The image of God already in you. The realm of God already in you. The love of God, the peace of God, the joy of God already in you, so that Jesus could say to you, *My peace I give you.* You've already got it. He also said, *My joy in you so that your joy might be full.* You've already got it. He said, *Love yourself and then your neighbour and then God.* Love and peace and joy already in you. No one can give it to you and therefore no one can take it away. No government to make you happy or take you away from your happiness. We may be mad at government but we cannot blame government for our circumstances or happiness. No institution can give it to you or take it away from you. These are sacred scriptures. May they comfort you and inspire you and challenge you.

So after Jesus had healed and preached to thousands of people they started to worship him and do you know what Jesus said? Jesus said, *Don't worship me. Worship God.* Jesus wanted to point people away from himself to God. Jesus saw himself as a guide, as a leader, helping people discover a path to walk down the path. He didn't want to make it about him; he wanted to make it about the path. It wasn't about the messenger, it was about the message. Turn back to God. It's about God. So the ups and downs of his life, the highs and the lows, the rewards, the recognition – we can let them all go to our heads. Last night John and I were given tickets – and I didn't say what it was this morning as I didn't know if the congregation could handle it – but we went to see "Evil Dead", the musical. It's really good, really gory, but really good. It was a lot of fun and someone had given us tickets and on the way home we came home on the



LESSONS for LIFE

subway. We were on the subway and a young man walked up to me and he said, “You know, I never thought I’d see a member of the Order of Canada on the subway.” (laughter). For a split second I wanted to say, “John, you should have got me a taxi.” We can let praise go to our heads. Jesus could have been very unrealistic about praise that day. Hosanna hosanna in the highest. All the shouting and the crowds were about him, but he realized that in just a few days the hosannas would change to crucify. If we allow the praise from someone else, if we live our life for the praise or the recognition then we can easily be lifted up or devastated by the external comments of someone else. It’s not about someone else’s praise or recognition and it’s also not about someone else’s criticism. Jesus was surrounded by needs and by difficulties and yet Jesus knew that in God ultimate victory would come for everyone, even if he didn’t heal them; that ultimately their healing would come. We can live our lives based on fear or based on faith. There’s a movement called appreciative enquiry. When I first heard of it I thought it was some ‘woeey’ stuff but when I paid attention a little more I realized there was some truth to it. Appreciative enquiry is where you’re in one situation and you want to be somewhere else. Maybe you are here and want to be there and have a promotion and make more money; or maybe you’re here and are single and you want to be there in a relationship – whatever. Most of us would say okay, we’re at A and we want to be at B so what do we do about this gap? And so we become ‘gap-focused.’ Appreciative enquiry says there’s a much more effective way to get from A to B. It’s not about focusing on the gap – yes, you can visualize B; you can spend some time visualizing where you want to be, but the best way to move from A to B is to start with A. Start with your strengths, how you’ve overcome a situation in the past and build on that so that you focus on the good and not on the gap if you want to get from A to B. The place to start is right here (hand on heart) and the God in you and the love in you and through you for our world. The peace in you and through you for our world; the joy in you and through you for our world. Hosanna – a few days later, “Crucify him.” Jesus laid the foundation before the crowds came. He laid the foundations for his life before the praise came; before he started preaching his public ministry; before the attacks came and before the disciples came. Jesus began his ministry with laying the foundation of his connection with God, as young as twelve years old knowing he is called to do God’s work and to do God’s will in the world no matter what; that that was the focus. Knowing that he was called to tell people about abundant life; knowing that he was called to point the way; knowing that he was called to remind people about love and peace and joy. When you leave here this evening, this week you may get praise. It’s a wonderful gift. You may get criticized. It too can be a wonderful gift or it could be unfair. Whether you are praised or criticized, neither one should cause you to veer from the path of loving who you are, responding in peace and experiencing joy no matter what. Living with the loss but focusing on the gift.

I’m not unrealistic about all this. I know that there will be awful, awful moments; difficult, difficult moments. Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane begged God to take this cup from him. He didn’t want it. He wanted to live longer. He’d experienced life and he loved it and he said, *God, not mine but your will be done.* And on the cross Jesus said, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* But he didn’t stay there. A few minutes later he was able to say, *God into your hands I commit my spirit.* There will be those places of forsakenness, no question. There will be those times of deep, deep hurt and



LESSONS for LIFE

disappointment. We do not get stuck there. We do not blame God or circumstances and therefore stay there. We remember who we are – created in the image of God. We remember that God has placed within us love and peace and joy and no one and nothing can take that away. It's in that space that nowhere turns into NOW HERE.
Amen.