

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION on the EDGE of HOLY WEEK**

God of all hopefulness, we need you.

The story we share this week echoes through the ages  
as a symbol and sign of humanity's constant struggle.

That struggle is being laid bare in this time of restriction, fear, confusion and  
longing.

When our ideals are called into question, and our expectations are constantly  
shattered,

We turn to something eternal and – we hope – unshakable.

We remember the hope that Jesus represented  
to that haggard yet jubilant crowd so long ago.

We pin our hopes to the steadfast nature of your covenant promise,  
Made known to us through reflections on these Holy Scriptures.

Let the ancient words wash over us,  
and breathe hope and new life into us,

as the world continues to turn toward your promise of redemption and  
reconciliation.

We pray, as we listen – by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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The crowd has heard the news. Jesus – the one who makes miracles; the one who called Lazarus out of the grave – Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

People were already excited. It is festival time; Passover in Jerusalem. And as exciting as that can be, Jesus was causing more excitement. People are energized – hungry for more of these marvelous signs. Something special is obviously happening, and Jesus is at the centre of it all.

The religious officials were worried. Maybe folks would forget about Passover; maybe they would abandon the old ways. Maybe the uproar around Jesus and his ‘miracles’ would endanger this centuries’ old celebration of faith. ‘Can we count on people to remember how important this season of worship is to their spiritual health...and to our positions of power and authority?’

Jesus is drawing crowds – attracting interest – making disciples – at the expense of traditional religion. And now that Lazarus is once again amongst the living, there is momentum in the ‘Jesus movement’ that may be unstoppable. It’s all too dangerous as far as the people in charge are concerned. Something must be done.<sup>10</sup> The chief priests were secretly plotting Lazarus’s murder since,<sup>11</sup> because of him, many Jews were leaving their teachings and believing in Jesus. (John 12:10-11)

### **Read John’s Gospel: Chapter twelve, verses twelve to nineteen**

#### **Reflection on the parade -**

**“Look, the world has gone after him!”**

Five days to Passover, and Jesus is making his way to the city. The crowds go out to meet him – confirming the religious leaders’ worst fears. Branches are cut down and waved overhead like banners. “Hosanna!” they shout – *Lord save us!*

The times that the gospel describes – the land of Palestine in Jesus’ day - was dangerous and confusing for the Hebrew people. They have lived under Roman rule for a long time. They are trying to be faithful – they want to believe – but the people had been waiting for God’s promises to be revealed, and the old habits and rituals didn’t feel like they were working. People are asking questions that the religious experts can’t easily answer.

This new thing, this solitary teacher from Galilee with his small group of students, is causing a commotion wherever they go. When times are tough, new things are very attractive, and Jesus is offering something new.

People are being healed. Old ideas are being challenged. A man has been called back from death, for heavens' sake! Who cares about solid, well-rehearsed religious answers at a time like this? Maybe this is God's Messiah, coming to set us free in the very season we celebrate God's most famous act of liberation to date?

This will always get people excited – the thought that God has finally (and once again) sent someone to save them.

No wonder the leaders were worried.

Those who once controlled the 'right way to worship' – those who helped enforce the rules around the way people lived out their faith – cannot seem to understand (nor can they control) this sudden, energetic sense of hope that surrounds Jesus as he rides into town like a conquering hero. The people want miracles – Jesus delivers. The rules of faith seem frustrating and pointless when the blind are being given their sight and the dead are being brought back to life. These signs and wonders can't be explained by the people who have been in charge of explaining God. When the hope overflows into the streets – when the people's cheers reach the offices of the powerful rulers, something is bound to happen.

We remember today – with the story of this palm parade – the feeling that must have swept over the crowds as Jesus went about the countryside.

We remember Jesus, who walked and talked – who taught and worshipped – as though God was standing next to him. Jesus, who referred to God as parent and partner; who talks to God (and about God) as though God were his oldest, dearest friend. Jesus, who knows the rules of faith, but only follows the ones that show God's mercy or convey God's amazing love.

That feeling of hope – the excitement of knowing that God is doing wonderful things, even now – is at the very root of faith. Hope is what we want most of all when things are uncertain, and when hope is offered in the simplicity of compassion and loving-kindness – when hope emerges among people who are considerate and mindful of the way God still works, the doubters and the powerful people still get worried.

Just as in Jesus' day, there are powerful people trying to detour hopefulness and wonder. In Jesus time, they plotted to kill the source of hope. In our time, they offer alternatives: programs to follow, products to buy, or rules to obey that (they say) will satisfy us. But nothing is quite the same as the sight of Jesus, riding in to town with the promise of God's presence plain on his face (and in his words and actions)

No product or program can compete with Jesus, and on that day, everyone knew it.

"Look, the whole world has gone after him!"

### **Reading from the Old Testament    Isaiah 50: 4-9**

Reflection on the prophet's words -

"It is the Lord who helps me; who will declare me guilty?"

Prophets are rarely trusted in their own time. Jesus went so far as to declare that a prophet has no honour in their hometown. That's because prophets are not capable of 'soft-peddling' their particular message. The words of a prophet are stark and against the grain. A pastor or preacher might 'speak the truth in love,' but a prophet can only speak the truth. Without regard for personal feelings – without thinking about who might be inconvenienced. The prophets' task is singular and thankless. A prophet doesn't always offer solutions, but almost always brings a reminder of consequences. Isaiah's words were hard to hear in Isaiah's time. His 'teacher's tongue' offered the faithful a way to see light at the end of the tunnel of exile. His hopeful message was not always well received.

There are always those who imagine that any signs of hope are nothing more than fantasy. Realists, they call themselves; people who are determined to be self-reliant when the chips are down – to make their own way through difficult circumstances.

There are others who would advise us to make our own hope. To trust in God is to abandon individual initiative, they say – so fight to fit in; take power and privilege where it is offered. Forget ancient promises, and live in the present with a vengeance.

These 'Law of the jungle' advocates have no time for the prophet's plaintive reminders. They disparage dependence on divine assistance; they have made (pragmatism) their religion, and make gods of themselves. The only past that matters is personal experience – collective memories are quaint but inconvenient; they have no value to those whose goal is self-determination, self-preservation and self-promotion.

Isaiah taught people about their past, in which God featured as distant hero. The prophet trusts God implicitly and in spite of the world's evidence against such faith. And we are bold to take Isaiah's words and apply them to Jesus' situation.

The circumstances are similar. Hope in God seems to produce only despair. The idea of 'divine rescue' is a faded, near-forgotten dream. The world is having its way with God's beloved people, and that is that. And into this time of bare hopefulness comes Jesus.

His teaching tongue presents a new perspective of that ancient hope – delivered against the world's evidence. And like the prophet, we are willing to declare that, in Jesus, we have seen evidence of divine mercy and divine presence. Even a guilty verdict in the trial we know is coming cannot shake our certainty. God is doing something wonderful – something we don't yet understand – something that revives our hope even in the face of death and despair.

Could there be a better example to have before us at a time like this?

