

Waited So Long for This Palm Sunday 2019

So, I begin this sermon with a disclaimer.

I need to acknowledge in advance that my subject matter in these next few minutes may cause pain to some in the room.

Specifically, I apologize to those loyal fans of the following men's basketball programs:

Texas Tech, Auburn, Purdue, Oregon, Oklahoma, and Gardner-Webb.

In other words,

all the teams whom my hometown team, Virginia, *beat* on their way to the national championship last Monday night.

I should note that among the loyal followers of those teams are several of my fellow church staff, so I feel just a little guilty trumpeting Virginia's big win.

No – no, I really don't.

We've waited so long for this.

I grew up a mile away from the University of Virginia, where my dad taught, and my mom, too;

her dad taught there, too;

she was born in the U.Va. hospital.

And we have lived and died by Virginia basketball for decades.

When I was in high school, I had pictures of the team all over my bedroom walls;

I made cookies and took them to the team practice –

and by the way, you had to sign up in advance for the honor of making cookies for the team.

My senior year of high school, I took my saved-up babysitting money and bought myself a season ticket.

That was 39 years ago.

Been watching, and waiting, ever since.
A couple Final Fours. A few Sweet Sixteens. An Elite Eight.
All ending in the heartbreak of disappointment,
sackcloth and ashes in the streets of Charlottesville Virginia.
Until Monday night.
when the streets of Charlottesville were alive with exuberance.
Watching video of U.Va. students dancing down the sidewalks,
all I could think was,
oh you sweet little 19 year olds,
as good as you feel right now,
you have no idea how good this feels to us old folks
who have waited soooooo long.

Tuesday afternoon was when the bus rolled into Charlottesville
carrying the weary but victorious team.
They stepped off and walked down a gauntlet of well-wishers,
waving signs, shrieking with excitement,
holding out their hands hoping for a touch, a handshake, anything.
And in the crowd were so many folks my age and older.
Who had waited sooooo long.
Waited so long for this.

And I'm watching it, and of course I'm wishing I was there,
and I'm hearing the shrieks of joy
and the banners waving,
and it hits me:
this – this must be pretty much what Palm Sunday looked like.
This is what it looked like when they swarmed the streets of Jerusalem,
waving palms and shouting out,
craning their necks to catch a glimpse of their hero,
hundreds of people down each street, around each corner,
eager to see, to touch.

Now listen, I'm a crazy fan,
but even I'm not crazy enough to equate
U.Va. basketball players getting off the bus
with the arrival of the Messiah.

Those boys are going to have enough trouble staying humble
without preachers like me
making *that* kind of analogy.

I *am* talking about the feeling in the crowd.
I *am* talking about what it had to have felt like to have waited a lifetime,
ten lifetimes,
for something that seemed like it was never going to happen.
I am talking about waiting on good news,
and what it feels like when good news finally comes down the street.

The people of Israel had waited *so long* for good news.
So very long.
For centuries their prophets had promised them a Messiah
who would be God's messenger of truth,
God's bringer of joy.
For generations they had lived under the weight of the oppressor,
Roman soldiers on every corner.
They dreamed of a better day.
They dreamed of a time to come,
They hoped, and they waited, and they waited.
They had waited so long.

And then one day,
the word comes in from the country side.
That guy,
that man we've been hearing about,

that Jesus, he's on his way.

That Jesus, the one who's been healing people
and talking about the kingdom of God, he's on the way.

That Jesus, the guy who embraces the poor
and loves the lost and lonely, he's on his way.

And you know what – we think he's *the One*.

He's the One.

He's bringing salvation.

Everything we've waited for, for so long,
is about to ride through the gates of Jerusalem.

So, no wonder the people of Jerusalem were going crazy.

No wonder they were lining the streets,
tearing branches from the trees,
screaming in joy.

They'd been waiting so long.

They'd waited so long for good news.

And now it was here.

Down the street came a man dressed in simple robes,
riding on a donkey – the same thing any peasant would have done.
No parade float, no chariot, no white horse,
just – like us, like one of us.

Only not. Not like us.

Whatever you imagine it must have been like to be in **Christ's** presence,
that's what those people experienced:

the sudden presence of Love,

a strange sense of joy --

a thrill of hope, reborn.

Good news, finally.

Good news. And they had waited so long.

It isn't ancient history we're talking about today.

It isn't something that happened once,
no *one and done* here.

The good news of God's love
that Jesus brought into Jerusalem that day
is the *same* good news
that each of us needs,
and each of longs for, waits for.

Hope.

Healing.

Forgiveness.

Love.

Acceptance.

The good news then is the good news now –
and though our world looks different from the world then,
there is nothing different about our need, our hunger,
for what Christ offers to us.

Hope, healing, forgiveness, love – acceptance.

Almost twenty years ago now,
we welcomed a woman here at the church to speak to us about her life.

She was a missionary -- she still is one,
we still hear from her regularly. Her name is Choon.

Choon was born in Malaysia.

Her father had been sold by his parents because they needed money;
Choon's mother also had been sold off.

And Choon herself was an unwanted child:

She was a daughter, not a son,
born on a day the priests said was inauspicious,
in the year of the Tiger: a bad omen three times over.

Only her mother's pleading had kept Choon's father from giving *her* away.

Raised as though she had no worth,
as if humanity itself wanted to forget her,
when she was a teenager Choon heard, from a Christian,
the story of a God who loved her.

For the first time, she understood what she was worth: **everything**.
For the first time, she felt treasured, known, remembered.

And she knew that her life's work would be to make sure others knew that,
too.

Her work took her to Afghanistan at the height of the Taliban,
where, in dark corners of homes,
secretly she taught women to read and to write
and to know that they were loved, that they had worth.

And when she was visiting with us, here,
she told us a story I've never forgotten.

"Whenever I am asked if it was worth it," she said,
"I tell them about an Afghan girl named Miriam.

Miriam could not read, could not even write her own name,
and she did not know that she was precious in God's sight.

And one day, finally, she was able to spell out her own name --
with a stick on the dirt floor she scratched it out, letter by letter.

And the next day when I came to her,

she said, "Choon, I prayed last night. I prayed to your Jesus.

And I saw him holding out his hands to me.

I saw his hands held out to me.

And I saw that written in the palm of his hand was my name.

My own name.

I could read my name written on his hand."

She knew, then, Miriam knew,
that she had worth,

that she was treasured,
that she was loved.
Miriam had waited a long, long time for that good news.
And it had come to her,
in the person of that same Jesus who rode into Jerusalem,
in the presence of that same Christ for whom the palms were waved.
The good news had come to her
and her joy was as great as *any* who have waited to be loved.

Just two months ago,
at our high school youth group,
we welcomed an extraordinary speaker.
Sammy Rangel is the director of *Life After Hate*,
an organization committed to the eradication of hate groups,
committed to doing whatever it takes to break down the walls that separate
us,
and to build communities of acceptance and love.
But oh boy, he's walked a hard, hard road to get to this point.
Sammy grew up in a household filled with its own violence,
raised by a mother so abusive that we gasped to hear his stories.
He ran away from home as soon as he could,
grew up on the streets,
and in no time found himself in juvenile detention,
and soon the prison system.
With stark honesty,
Sammy told us of the violence he visited on others;
and time and again he was put into solitary confinement
for his own safety and the safety of others.
The kids listened to him, riveted.
“What happened?” one of them asked him. “How did you go from that to
who you are now?”
And Sammy told us this story.

It was a time when he had been put in solitary again,
but the most extreme version of solitary –
the hole, he called it. A cell down below the others,
with only a slit in the door.

No human contact, he said.

And there he sat and waited –
and for what he waited he didn't know.

And one day there was a knock in the door.

"You have to understand," he said to us,

"This was not a door that anyone, ever, knocked on."

And a voice on the other side of the door said,

"Sammy, I'm the psychiatrist here.

Just wondered if you wanted to talk."

And Sammy said to us,

it was the first time anyone had ever, ever asked to hear my story.

He said yes.

To bring him out of there,

he had to put his hands through the slit in the door so they could cuff him
first,

and then they straitjacketed him on his way out –

I looked kind of like Hannibal Lecter, he said.

And they brought him to the counselor's office.

Then the counselor asked the guards to take off Sammy's chains.

And he invited Sammy to talk.

"He just listened to me," Sammy said.

"And no one ever had."

And that, I'll tell you, that was the Good News that Sammy had been waiting
for,

whether he knew it or not.

That was the moment when he began to hope,

when he discovered that he was loved and had the capacity to love,
that he was forgiven and had the capacity to forgive.

He had been waiting so long.

And by the grace of God, and the words of a gentle man,
he received God's good news:

healing, hope, forgiveness, acceptance.

And that's what he teaches now. That's what he teaches everywhere.

You don't have to wait.

You don't have to wait.

The Good News that God's people in Jerusalem were waiting for, for so long
– it's yours **now**.

The same good news that an Afghan girl named Miriam was waiting for,
the same Good News that our friend Sammy was waiting for.

It's yours now.

It's ours now.

And *that* -- that's reason for joy!

The same joy that sent people into the streets of Jerusalem, palms in their
hands.

A waaaay better joy than basketball joy.

The joy that is soul-deep and spirit-nurturing,
the joy that is life-giving and life-sustaining.

The joy of knowing that we, too, are loved,
that we are accepted. Forgiven.

That we are cherished, healed and made whole.

Hosanna indeed. *Hosanna in the highest!* Amen.