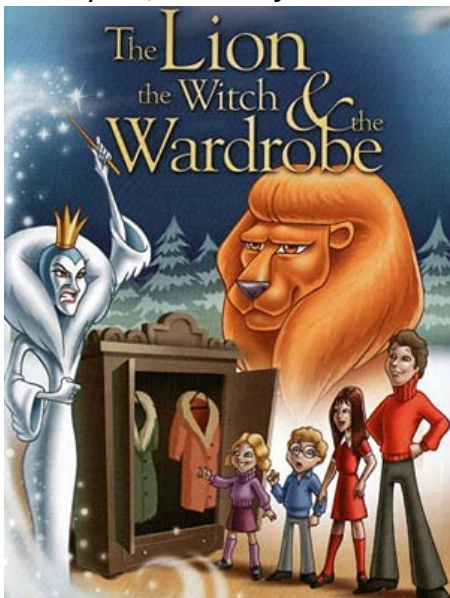
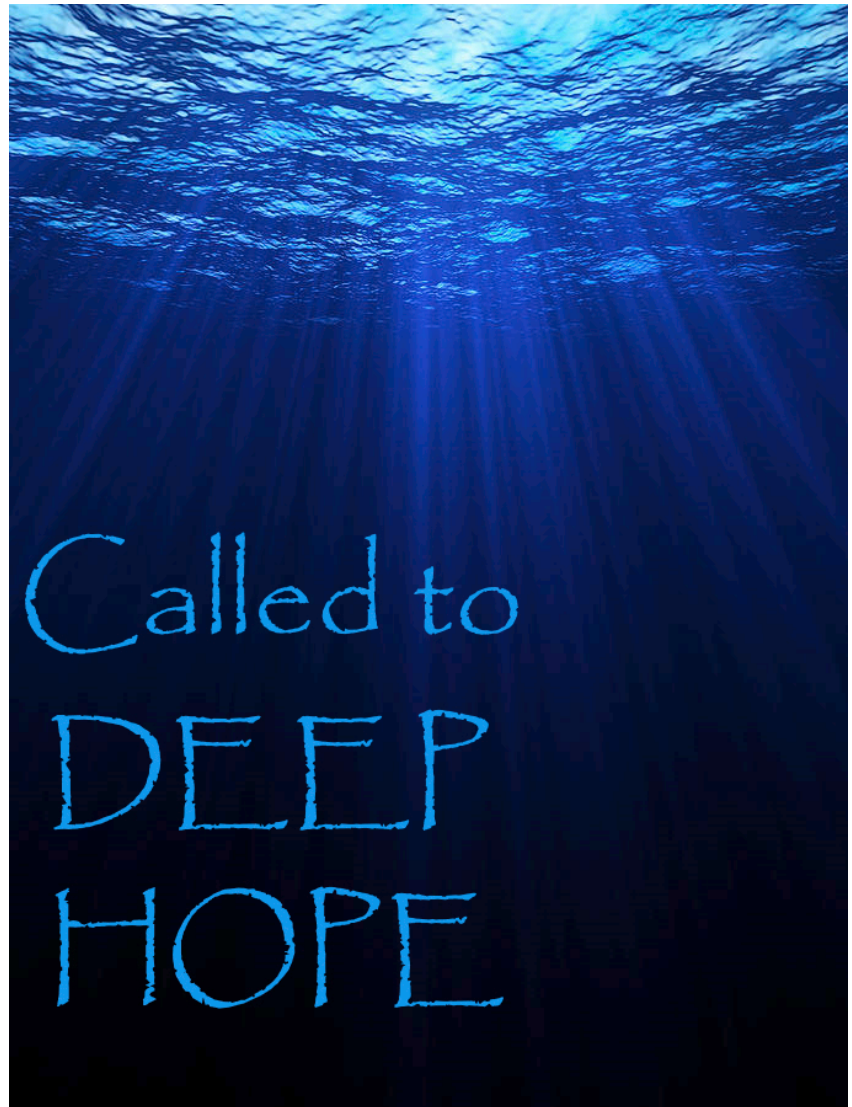


Lent 6, 28 March 2021
John 12:12-16; Philippians 2:5-11
Called to DEEP Hope
First Mennonite Church

Palm Sunday is a day of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, Jesus enters Jerusalem to desperate, hope-filled, and jubilant crowds. On the other hand, these desperate, hope-filled, and jubilant crowds turn into fearful, angry and bloodthirsty ones a few days later. Those wanting his death, get their wish.

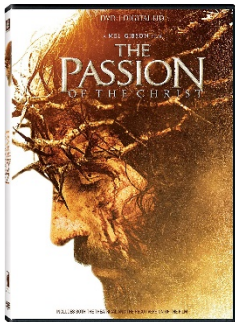
These conflicting emotions raise the question about who people thought Jesus was. One must look no further than popular culture to see a wide range of viewpoints about Jesus. While there are many examples, here is just a small sampling



C.S. Lewis', **The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe**, is an enchanting story of a White Witch, a lion called Aslan, and four brave children. The children are at a family friend's home. While there they stumble upon an enormous wardrobe which transports them to the world of Narnia. Narnia itself was once a peaceful realm filled with talking animals, fauns, Giants and dwarves that is now under a cursed eternal winter by the White Witch. The children and the lion, Aslan battle against the white witch, and in the battle, Aslan dies. But he comes back to life and restores peace and order to Narnia. This is an example of Christian allegory, that is, a story about how Jesus triumphs over evil through his death on the cross.



Jesus Christ Superstar is a musical, and the story is very loosely based on the Gospels' accounts of the last week of Jesus's life, beginning with the preparation for the arrival of Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem and ending with the crucifixion. Much of the plot centres on Judas, who is dissatisfied with the direction Jesus is going.



Mel Gibson's movie, **The Passion of the Christ**, depicts the final twelve hours in the life of Jesus, on the day of his crucifixion. We know Jesus died in a particularly painful and violent way—Mel Gibson wanted to put that violence on screen. That saved us from having to imagine the violence done because the movie shows every whip, every nail, every violent act.

I find it fascinating to see the variety of ways that Jesus is understood and portrayed in popular culture. In some of the films Jesus had a glow—the way the light shone on him and the way he spoke his words—made him seem very, very holy and otherworldly. And other films he was so human that he was no longer recognizable as God's son, or at least what we might think of God's son would be like.

Obviously, these writers and filmmakers started at different places with different understandings of who Jesus was and what he was about. That's not surprising. When we look at scriptures, we see that many people weren't sure who Jesus was and what he was about either. Of course, some thought they knew who Jesus was, others, hoped they knew, and some were afraid of who he was. And these hopes, these fears, and expectations affected how they saw and heard and experienced Jesus as he walked among them.

In this morning scripture reading from John, Jesus walks right into the heart of these differing expectations. He's on his way to Jerusalem. He's accompanied by a multitude of enthusiastic folks who took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him. We get the name, Palm Sunday, from this story in John. If you read your Bibles carefully, you won't find any mention of palm branches in the other gospels. Only in John are they mentioned. The crowd took palm branches and went out to meet him shouting, *'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!'*

The people in the crowd have heard or seen Jesus performing amazing signs, most recently, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. So on this day, their hopes are sky high. Their cry expresses their desperate hope and expectation. Hosanna means “save us” expressing the peoples’ desire to be delivered. They anoint him “King of Israel”, hoping Jesus will accept the role of a nationalistic deliverer. They hope, they even expect that he is the one who will finally deliver them from high taxes, crippling poverty, and this never-ending cycle of foreign domination. And they hope that this will be the day that he declares himself King Jesus and usher in the Reign of God.

Jesus’ closest disciples, the chosen 12, are among this group. They share these same hopes—and they have a few of their own—specifically, they've been his faithful followers all along the way and they hope, and maybe even expect that Jesus will give them a special place in his kingdom, perhaps an honoured seat at the right hand of God.

One of Jesus’ disciples was named **Simon the Zealot** (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). The Zealots were a 1st century violent revolutionary group whose goal was to rid Israel of the Roman oppressors. The Romans would have called Simon a terrorist. No doubt, he and others like him were part of the crowd that day, too. This group was biding its time waiting to see what Jesus would do. Perhaps Jesus would call down fire from heaven to destroy the Romans and the collaborators. Or perhaps Jesus would launch a popular uprising that would help start a war of freedom. Perhaps today would be the day.

Now of course, not everyone is pleased to see Jesus riding into Jerusalem. When they see him coming into Jerusalem with this large crowd of people at his side, **their fears rather than their hopes**, run high. These people are the religious leaders and the power brokers of the community. Their main concern is to keep the peace, to keep the simmering pot of resentment and hatred toward the Romans from boiling over. They know if there's any kind of unrest, any hint of riot, the Roman authorities will be quick to crack down with brutality and violence. So when they see Jesus processing into town with this crowd of desperate people they are not pleased. They know that this kind of ruckus could mean big trouble, but they seem powerless to do anything about it. **[30]** Exasperated, they say to one another, *“You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”* (John 12:19).

In the meantime, the Roman security forces are on high alert. They don't know who Jesus is, but they are prepared for the worst. This is, after all, Passover week—a week when over 100,000 additional Jewish pilgrims flood the city to celebrate God's saving acts, to remember how God liberated them from bondage in Egypt over a thousand

years earlier. Talk about a security nightmare! Thousands upon thousands of Jews in one place, remembering their history of liberation and **all the while resenting** the current domination and exploitation at the hands of the hated Roman oppressors.

So Roman soldiers make their presence known. They station themselves conspicuously on the roof of a temple portico just in case anyone has forgotten who really is in power. Jesus is undoubtedly aware of these complex dynamics. He undoubtedly feels the pressure of the hopes, the fears...the expectations. He knows that some see him as a miracle worker, a political hero, a revolutionary, a heretic, a troublemaker, a threat to the status quo, and he knows that no one really gets it, no one really understands who he is and what he is about.

When I look at our world today and ponder all that I am seeing and hearing, I imagine that Jesus shakes his head at our lack of understanding, and what that lack of understanding is leading us to. Many claim to know who Jesus is. If you listen to the many voices around us today you will hear some very definite ideas about who Jesus is:

- Jesus came to earth so he could die and save us from our sins
- Jesus will keep bad things from happening to us
- Jesus wants to shower us with financial blessings as long as we are living right
- Jesus is our example; he shows us how to live
- Jesus wants our country to be Christian
- He's the one who keeps us from spending eternity in hell as long as we believe in him
- Jesus hates those who live ungodly lives, and wants his faithful ones to destroy God's enemies

While this list is not exhaustive it is clear that not all of these views of Jesus work well together. In fact, some of them conflict with each other. So, the question for us becomes which Jesus? Which Jesus is the real Jesus? Which Jesus are we called to follow? Which Jesus are we to place our hope in?

Jesus himself has something profound to say about this on the day that he processes into Jerusalem. **And, it's not so much what he says as what he does.** Although Jesus has made this journey to Jerusalem by foot, he decides to make this last leg of the journey on the back of a beast of burden. And he is very particular about what animal he rides. Jesus chooses a young donkey. John takes great pains to tell its significance by omitting and changing the wording of Zechariah 9: 9-10, which means that this detail is significant.

For instance, Zechariah uses the words, triumphant and victorious, suggesting military conquest, but John omits these words. Also, Zechariah speaks of Israel's future liberation by describing a coming king humble and riding on a donkey. John changes the word, riding to sitting. The liberation Israel is hoping for and expecting will not be done by military means, but to Jesus' victory already won by God's decree. **Sitting means reigning:** the victory envisioned by Zechariah has already been achieved.

So, when Jesus sits on a donkey the signal is clear to those around Jesus and to those who will later hear the story. It's clear that Jesus intends to enter the city as a king. The crowds get it—or do they? They go crazy! They take branches from Palm trees and welcome him by shouting:

'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!'



But as Jesus enters the city in this Royal procession there is something different about this king. Unlike others before him he does not come into the city riding on a chariot or a war horse. Many years ago, when I visited Rome, I went to see the Arch of Titus. It shows Titus returning to Rome victorious after having put

down a violent insurrection in Palestine in AD70. Titus was the one who destroyed Jerusalem and burnt the Temple to the ground. In stark contrast to Titus, Jesus doesn't come with an army of weapons to take over the city. Instead, he rides on a young donkey, a borrowed one, at that. Jesus presents himself as a humble prince of peace, not a violent warrior or monarch. John alters the words of the prophet Zechariah to reflect this fact:

*'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!'*

By his actions we see that Jesus is not assuming the role of a typical king. He is not a king of the rich and famous, who would no doubt have covered the path before him with expensive garments. No. He's the king of fishermen, tax collectors, Samaritans,

prostitutes, people afflicted by maladies of body and spirits who have nothing to lay before him but tattered cloaks and shawls and dusty sweat stained rags. Nor is he a king that has come to impose his rule by force.

Believe it or not this King will eventually allow himself to be arrested and executed for a crime that he did not commit. By the end of the week that began so joyously, Jesus followers will find him dead. This is not the kind of thing they had expected. This is not what they had hoped for. And if we're honest it may not be what we hope for either. We hope for victory, for success, certainly not defeat or death.

And what makes things even more complicated is when we look at all the things that this King has said and done on this journey toward Jerusalem. We see that he promotes values like **loving our enemies** which go against the values our world holds dear. King Jesus tells us to love our enemies, which we know is far easier said than done. And given particular circumstances of our lives, we may wonder validly so if it's even wise and if it's even possible to do this! And then there is this thing about **humility**—King Jesus tells us the first will be last and the last will be first. He says do not to strive for the places of highest honour but to occupy the place of a servant. If we would take that seriously we probably wouldn't get very far in life. And then there's this thing about **self denial**. King Jesus asks us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. He's really talking about self denial in an age of instant gratification. It does not sell well and we are painfully aware that this teaching has been too often used to keep oppressed people in their place. King Jesus don't get us wrong—it's not that we don't believe in you, it's not that we don't love you, but sometimes we don't understand you! And if we're honest, we sometimes wish you were more like us. We want you to be the one who will fulfill **our** hopes and expectations, we want you to be the one who will meet all **our** wants and needs and keep us from suffering. We want you to be the one who will bless **our** perspectives and justify **our** lifestyle.

But this morning's story reminds us Jesus will not be swayed by the whims of the crowd. Nor will he be scared off by the threat of suffering, pain, or death. He will be guided by the voice of the Spirit of the one who sent him. And he will follow the way of that voice faithfully till the end. The way of that voice is love, costly, sacrificial, self giving love. This love will take Jesus to the cross. And there we see a king who, in the words of an ancient hymn found in Philippians 2, empties himself taking the form of a slave and humbles himself, remaining faithful to loves way, to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And there we see a king who defeats the power of evil and sin and death not with the strength of the sword, nor with military might, but by the power of self-giving love. And God exalts him, gives him the name above every name that we might confess him as our Lord. This is the Jesus, this is the king, this is the Lord that we are invited to place our hope in, give our lives too and follow. He may not conform to our hopes and our expectations. In fact, he may challenge much that we hold dear, but as we dare to move beyond our resistance and take hold of him and follow, we come to see in a new way. We see that Jesus wasn't and isn't called to conform to our image; we are called to conform to his. And we see that this transformation is possible as we allow his love to enter deeply into our lives. As we open ourselves to following Love's way.

Of course, in the end the choice is ours. Jesus is not a coercive King. He will never force us to follow. but he does leave us with a choice. Will we give him our loyalty? Will we follow his way? This is not a choice that is made once and then forgotten. It's a choice that we make over and over again each time we face a unique difficulty, or challenge, or loss. Each time we see a need and feel called to respond; each time we feel pushed to our limits; each time we feel threatened by hate or anger or fear. There's always a choice which lies before us. Will we follow Jesus? Will we allow his love to touch and heal and strengthen us? And will we allow his love to flow through us to bring healing and hope to the world?

May we be given the grace to say, YES, not just with our lips but with our lives. And may our yes-es make a way in this world for healing, redemption, fullness of life, and deep, deep hope in God's incredible ability to bring about the restoration of all things. Amen.