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Sermon Series: *Lenten Letters*, No. 6

Laodicea: Blinded

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020 (video)

Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11, 18 Revelation 3:14-22

There are two texts I'll read this morning. The first is the Palm Sunday story as reported by Mark. Mark 11, the first eleven verses:

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem and came to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ²saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

⁴They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve...

¹⁸The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard all this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. [NIV]

And then this passage from Revelation chapter 3, starting in verse 14, Jesus' letter to the church in Laodicea. Jesus says,

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ Yet, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you – buy from me:

gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich;
and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness;

and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." [NIV]

On the surface of it, you might think these two texts have little to do with each other: one is the public, earthly revealing of Jesus as the Messiah/King that He is, and the other is Jesus' letter of warning to a church that had become

thoughtless and lazy – indifferent to their Savior and their faith.

And yet I'd suggest to you that there is at least one big similarity between these two situations, and it has to do with blindness – with people's inability to see and to perceive reality.

The two Revelation churches receiving the severest rebuke from Jesus were the churches at Sardis and at Laodicea, but Laodicea is the only church of the seven to receive no credit at all for any good virtue.

What was the problem? We see the heart of it there in verse 17, where Jesus says, "*You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*"

The people of Laodicea were rich. The city was rich. How rich was it? It was so rich that when it was destroyed by a major earthquake in the year 60 AD, even though Nero offered it financial assistance from the empire's treasury, Laodicea rejected it and paid for its own rebuilding, to even greater splendor than before, by itself!

In our age of complaining that the government isn't doing enough in times of crisis, imagine that!

The city was not only a major banking center, it was also famous for its medical school that had developed a powder that was very effective in treating a common eye disease. And it was well known for the luxurious black wool clothing produced there.

So, you can see now why Jesus says the things He does to them about being poor, blind and naked, and that they should come to Him for gold, salve and clothing.

But it was not really their wealth that Jesus speaks against here.

What He laments is what their wealth had done to their perspectives about reality.

They had gotten so used to what their wealth had made possible for them, they were no longer able to see what was real. Like the rest of their culture, they had come to believe that their wealth was the answer to all their problems – that they needed nothing – or there was nothing that they needed that they couldn't supply for themselves.

Their wealth had caused them to think themselves so independent that they rejected any sense of need – any sense of being dependent at all – even dependent on God, which made them fit very comfortably and smoothly into the ebb and flow of their world.

And so, they no longer stood for what God stands for.

They weren't compassionate toward the marginalized. They did not hurt when others hurt.

They would not risk themselves for the good of others.

They failed to stand against the ungodly practices of their culture.

They no longer saw the need those around them had for Jesus.

They were complacent. Neither hot nor cold. They liked the way things were.

They'd become a people who trusted in their wealth to take care of themselves, instead of being a people who trusted in God for the sake of the care for others.

They'd become blind to God's perspective of what was important, what was real, and who they were to be as His church, the body of Christ.

And you see, it was that same blindness to reality that affected the religious leaders on that first Palm Sunday.

It's not as though those people were ignorant or uninformed. They were intelligent. They were educated, especially having to do with their own sacred writings.

They knew very well that a savior was to come, and they knew that Jesus was checking all those "messiah" boxes! He was doing things that were unexplainable by any merely human power. He was fulfilling prophecy after prophecy after prophecy, right before their eyes.

But they were blind to the magnitude of it all – and you know, their blindness, just like that of the Laodiceans, was brought on by wealth. Maybe not the same sort of extravagance that those at Laodicea enjoyed, but by the wealth that comes with the security of their own status quo.

You see, they, themselves, had good lives. And they liked their lives. They liked the authority they had: the comfort, the power, the respect of the people. Because they were on the upper end of things, they liked their culture. They fit very smoothly and comfortably into the ebb and flow of their world, and so they rejected any sense of need – any sense of being dependent – including dependence on God.

And so, they no longer stood for what God stands for.

They had no compassion toward the marginalized.

They did not hurt when others hurt.

They would not risk themselves for another's good.

They failed to stand against the ungodly practices of their culture.

They no longer saw the need that those around them had for a savior.

They were complacent. They were neither hot nor cold. They liked the way things were.

They'd become a people who trusted in their wealth to take care of themselves, instead of being a people who trusted in God for the sake of the care of others, and so they'd become blind to God's perspective of what was important, what was real, and who they were to be as His people.

They were in a good place – a good place for them, anyway – and they knew that Jesus would upend all that in their lives.

You know, the truth is, we humans have an amazing capacity to convince ourselves of things that are simply not true, especially when it comes to our own well-being and status quo. If we're doing OK ourselves, then it's our human, fallen nature to just want things to stay that way.

But that is not God's nature, you see?

God's nature is for the good of others – it's always for the good of others.

And so when we choose to follow Jesus – when we receive Jesus – we receive, you might say, a down payment of God's own nature, which is a nature – a perspective and a vision – that sees the needs of others and then declares, "You know, that person is in trouble, and I'm going to do something to help that person – no matter the cost."

It's a nature that's changed – a world view that is no longer shaped by our culture, by our surroundings.

It's a perspective that's no longer "me first," but "God first," which means, "others first."

It's not all caught up in our own welfare, but instead, self-giving. Self-sharing. Self-denying.

Open-hearted and open-handed.

You see, it's that world-view – it's that perception of reality – that we don't see in the church at Laodicea. And neither do we see it in the religious leaders of Jesus day.

But we *do* see it in Jesus, and especially so on Palm Sunday.

It happened clear back in the Garden of Eden, at the time of the fall. That choice Eve and Adam made? It wasn't just a choice to eat the fruit. It was a choice to exalt themselves – to trust their own judgment over God's judgment about what was *good for them*, you see?

And that choice they made has scarred us all. It's made us all self-centered by nature.

And yet, God the Father sent His Son, Jesus, not just to forgive us for that sin and not just to save our souls for eternity, but to *change – to transform – our self-centered natures, today*, that we might be like Him – that we might be like Jesus and have a *self-giving* nature, like His own.

You see, it's not just your or my personal salvation that Jesus is interested in. In sending Jesus, God was aiming for the salvation of the world!

And how better to accomplish that than to change the nature of every person from one that serves self to one that serves others – and in doing so, serves God?

Can you imagine a world like that?

God can.

That's His Kingdom, and it starts with us. It starts with our own vision of what's really possible in Christ – what's possible in His body, the Church.

Are you stuck on self? Self-preservation? Self-service? Self-enhancement? Self-love?

Has wealth or independence or personal comfort distorted your vision, or even blinded you to God's greater purposes?

Is there transforming work God still wants to do in your heart today? Jesus will do that.

He tells even the Laodiceans – the most severely rebuked of the Revelation churches – that He's standing at the door and knocking. You see, He wants to redeem – to save – and to transform. He loves us that much – even in our sins, even when we resist, even when we're are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

Still He calls us to Himself – for us and for our world.

That's why He rode the donkey into Jerusalem – even though He knew He would die there.

That's why He accepted their praise – though He knew the "Hosanna" would turn to "Crucify!"

That's why He put up with confused crowds – and confused disciples!

That's why He subjected Himself to the authorities – blind as they were – and to their judgement, and to their cross.

He died to give us His own nature of others-centered love – to save us and to save our world.

That's why He's worthy of our worship.

Maybe one of the things He's trying to teach us in all this virus/quarantine stuff is that the best worship we can

give to Him doesn't happen in our gatherings. Our best worship happens in here, in our hearts, when we'll let Him have His way – when we give up our nature for His.

I think that's the palm branch Jesus really wants waved.

Lord, would you help us to worship you today for all that you are, for all that you've done, and for all that you still want to do for us and for our world. May your nature take hold, and not just take hold, but take over the nature of your body on earth, your Church. And may it start with every one of us on this special day. We love you, Jesus, and we thank you for what you came to do in us for the sake of the world. In Your name, we pray. Amen.