



# Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren

Continuing the Work of Jesus ....Peacefully, Simply, Together

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March 23, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren in the Diaspora.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This coming Sunday is Palm Sunday which marks the beginning of Holy Week. The children will receive palm branches and we will hear the traditional organ and piano duet 'The Palms'. My Palm Sunday message is entitled 'From Triumph to Tears' based upon Luke 19:29-42. The days from Palm Sunday to Easter mark the most significant events in the life of Jesus culminating in the glorious resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

It was a joy to share in communion this past Sunday and see some people in the sanctuary whom we have not seen in person for a while but who are feeling more comfortable gathering onsite as a result of receiving their vaccinations. I do look forward to the time when we can all assemble safely and get back to some sort of normalcy. Until that time arrives, I am thankful we have the technology which enables many of our members to join us online. We are very blessed to have Ed's dedication and technology expertise in making our worship services available online.

You have issued a strong call to sisters Rita Carter and Mary Etta Reinhart to serve as Pastor of Visitation and Interim Associate Pastor, respectively. From all the votes cast, it was a unanimous call. It has been a blessing for me to work with Rita and Mary Etta and I look forward to our continued ministry together.

While I am eager for us to move forward in a positive way at Mechanic Grove, I am also aware that some members are hurting from decisions, attitudes and comments over the past year. I am open to hearing from any members that would like to share their concerns and do what I can to facilitate healing in the spirit of Matthew 18. I am praying for God's healing power which can overcome division and move us forward in the unity of the Holy Spirit. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 is my prayer...'That they may all be one'. Jesus said very clearly in John 13:34-35 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

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For this week's piece of personal trivia, I would like to share about my interest in biking. You might see my bicycle on the bike rack on the back of my car. I mostly like to ride rails-to-trails and have biked most of them in our area. In addition, over the course of the last several years I biked the whole East Coast on whatever road was closest to the ocean from northern Maine to Key West. My longer bike rides took me from Pittsburgh to Washington D.C. and Cleveland to Cincinnati in Ohio. I have biked in faraway places like Alaska, Hawaii, Austria and China and look forward to biking in Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama so that I can claim to have biked in all the States east of the Mississippi River. I don't bike for speed but endurance.

"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen" *2 Peter 3:18*

Bob Kettering, Interim Senior Pastor

- I. As we look at the Palm Sunday text from Luke's Gospel, I want to divide this message into three parts: The Welcoming...the Weeping...and the Witnessing. Let me first focus on THE WELCOMING. Can't you just hear the cheers and chants of the crowds lining the streets of Jerusalem as Jesus appears on his triumphal trek through town? The excitement...the exaltation...the exuberance of their voices must have been extraordinary!

-this was the pivotal procession all Israel had been waiting for. This was the historical moment the prophets had foretold. This was a time of triumph for the Jews as time would now run out for the Roman occupation of Israel. The Messiah has come and he would rule from the throne of his ancestor, David. This parade through Jerusalem was a prelude to the victory celebration which would represent the hopes and aspirations of the Jews to be autonomous and free from the foreign shackles of the Romans. This parade would be none other than the Messiah coming to lead the Jews to triumph....King Jesus! Hosanna! Praise be to the Son of David!

- II. The only problem was that this supposed conquering king was not riding on the back of a stately stallion but on the back of a demure donkey. There was no waving of swords and standards...only palm branches swaying in the breeze. There was no casting of royal robes or fighting fatigues on the road ahead of the procession...only common cloaks and peasant garbs as the rag-tag ruler rode into town. What kind of a parade and procession is this?

-will the expectations of the crowds be dashed? They wanted a conquering king but were getting a prince of peace and that would not sit well for the majority of the masses. It rarely does. Most prefer force and power rather than humility and servanthood. Most take retaliation over negotiation and prefer saber-rattling over cross-bearing. So what kind of a parade and procession is this?

- III. In order to understand this welcoming and the significance and symbolism of this scenario, we need to look into the background and setting of this story. In Judaism there are three main festivals which are to be observed by all Jews: one is Pentecost, another is the Feast of Tabernacles and the other is Passover, also referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

-in Jesus' day Jews were scattered throughout Palestine and actually throughout the entire Roman Empire but when it came time to celebrate Passover, many Jews would plan a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover there.

-if a Jewish male lived far away, his one ambition would be to someday celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. I understand that yearning to want to stand on holy ground. One of my dreams was to visit Schwarzenau, Germany where the first Brethren baptism took place over three hundred years ago. Several years ago my son Alex and I were able to do just that.

IV. I always wanted to be in New York City for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and I had opportunity to take the train to New York on Thanksgiving Day for that very thing. Someday I would like to be at King's College Chapel in England for the Christmas Eve Service of Lessons and Carols that I hear every year on public radio.

-there is just something special about being on an original site. Many have spoken of the meaning they received from visiting the supposed tomb of Jesus or standing by the Sea of Galilee or seeing the wailing wall of the temple in Jerusalem.

-in Jesus' day and in our day as well, the closing words of the Passover or Seder meal are these words: "This year here; next year in Jerusalem". Yes, even today Jews around the world still desire to celebrate Passover in Israel.

V. I point this out so that you might have some feel for the type of setting, desires and expectations of the Jews at Passover. The day we Christians call Palm Sunday, and regard as the beginning of Holy Week, is often the beginning of Passover week for the Jews. Passover is the holiest and most revered of all Jewish celebrations.

-as Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the town is packed out for Passover. Jews from all over the region had come to Jerusalem for the Passover pilgrimage. There was an air of excitement and expectancy. And remember that Passover calls to mind and celebrates the deliverance of Israel from slavery and bondage in Egypt. This deliverance theme took on added significance as the Jews were reminded of how God miraculously delivered them many years ago from one of the most powerful nations on earth.

-and Passover perpetuated the hope that God could and would deliver them once again from their present persecutors. During Passover the prayers for Messiah were more intense...a Messiah like Moses who would deliver Israel from their oppressors...a Messiah like David who would route the Romans. Israel had been occupied by foreign countries for centuries: Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Greeks and now the Romans.

VI. Was Jesus the ONE? Jesus had asked his disciple: "Who do the people say that I am?" Some said Elijah, some said Moses, some said a prophet...many were hoping that he was the Messiah. A few days before his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and word had spread rapidly about this miracle. He obviously possessed power from God. Would that power to raise the dead translate into military might to defeat the Romans? Could he rally the Jews like Judas Maccabeus had done over one hundred years earlier and reestablish the throne of David?

-all of this instant popularity caught the disciples off guard. Verse 16 of John chapter 12 says: "His disciples did not understand at first." Verses 17 & 18 go on to state the reason for this overwhelming reception of Jesus with shouts of hosanna and waving of palm branches.

VII. Verses 17 & 18 say: "The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead, was there giving eyewitness accounts. It was because they had spread the word of this latest God-sign that the crowd swelled to a welcoming parade."

-Jesus had proven himself in the eyes of the crowd to be God's Son and because of that success, people were now flocking around him telling him how much they were looking to him for inspiration...for leadership...yes, for deliverance...just as they had looked to Moses and David.

-once before, after he had fed 5,000 the Bible says the people wanted to force Jesus to be their king...but Jesus withdrew from the crowd. And now here in Jerusalem the people are shouting 'Hosanna' in holy harmony.

VIII. The word Hosanna is really a prayer and a plea to God taken from the words of Psalm 118:25 and literally means: "Save us, we beseech Thee". This plea...hosanna...came to be connected with messianic hopes...the man coming in the name of Yahweh is understood as the Messiah. What is happening here is not some petty peripheral procession. This parade has powerful political overtones.

-this is not like a celebrative St. Patrick's Day parade, nor the equivalent of Santa Claus coming to town. This has the political passion of the storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789...this is like the freedom march in Selma, Alabama in 1965 at the height of the civil rights struggle. As Christians we often downplay the political impact of this Palm Sunday procession. But the messianic hopes of the Jews were prevalent and passionate especially at the time Passover.

-I imagine that this crowd was probably not huge in number. Had it been too widespread the Romans would have quickly squelched these revelers from their military outpost at Fort Antonia which Herod had constructed adjacent to the temple grounds. But this parade nevertheless was of significant size so as to be a worriment to the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus. Verse 19 of our text says: "The Pharisees said to one another: 'Look the whole world has gone after him.'" If only their fears had been true.

IX. But as you and I know, the shouts of praise and acclaim soon died down and only a few short days later the shouts of 'crucify him' probably spewed from the very mouths who had praised Jesus on Palm Sunday. Why did the crowds so quickly change their tune?

-I believe it was because of many reasons, one of which may have been that the crowds felt betrayed by Jesus. Here they had given him a victory parade...a hero's welcome to Jerusalem with palm fronds flying...a first century equivalent of a ticker-tape parade. They wanted him to be a leader but he turned out to be a loser in their eyes. They wanted him to be a saber-rattler and he turned out to be a cross-bearer. He refused to conform to their expectations to be a conquering king after the likes of King David. They wanted him to establish the Kingdom of Israel to its former glory and make Israel great again, but he said 'My kingdom is not of this world.'

X. What a let-down! What a disappointment! The high hopes for a big success story come crashing down and Jesus is now viewed as a failure by most...uttering words of forgiveness to his enemies rather than fomenting hatred and strife. The crowd sees his meekness as weakness.

-who wants to follow a failure? Can you blame them? Who wants to pay attention to a loser? Who wants to praise a guy who cops-out...a guy who tells his followers to put away their swords because all who take the sword will perish by it? Is this a political leader you would vote for? Is he the guy you would support to lead your country?

XI. The crowds wanted to fit Jesus into their mold and make him into their concept of Messiah. But Jesus came to break their bonds by changing them...redirecting them from the road of darkness into the way of light.

-they wanted the immediate....he offered the eternal

-they wanted war with Rome...he offered peace

-they wanted regime change...he offered life change

-they wanted victory over enemies...he offered victory over sin.

-Jesus disappointed many people of his day because he would not cater to the false expectations of the crowd...he would not short-cut nor compromise God's way for the way of the world. That is what Satan tempted him to do when he was in the wilderness for 40 days.

XII. Following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus did not lead an insurrection against Rome as many had hoped...Jesus did not lead a riotous mob among the people...Jesus did not attend a victory feast. After a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, you would think Jesus would be warbling in success but we find him instead, weeping in sorrow. The Bible says that following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem...Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem...as triumph turned to tears. This is the second point of my message: THE WEEPING. Why was Jesus weeping?

-when Jesus realized the false expectations of the palm waving crowd...he wept...he cried tears of tragedy as he said: "If only you would dedicate yourselves to making for the things of peace!"

-and sadly, I believe Jesus continues to weep over our world...a world caught up in hatred and violence...a world which suffers the brutality of dictators and terrorists. Jesus weeps over our world because we have not yet grasped the law of love and the power of the cross.

XIII. It is the cross of Christ which stands as the symbol of our salvation and our hope. Jesus chose a cross instead of a crown...he went the way of suffering love rather than

recrimination. The Bible says Jesus could have called ten thousand angels to destroy the world and set him free. But he did not do that.

- XIV. When Peter tried to retaliate against those who came to capture Jesus, Peter took a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. But Jesus sternly told Peter: "Put your sword away, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

-and when Jesus hung on the cross...in his suffering and agony, Jesus offered forgiveness to those who sought to destroy him saying: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

-does the way of the cross make any sense to a world caught up in violence? Does the way of the cross have any logic for our world today? The Apostle Paul says...no. It does not seem logical. In I Corinthians 1:18 Paul says: "The cross seems like foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

- XV. How will we as Christ followers respond to the violence and hatred in our society? How will we teach our children the value and respect for all of human life from womb to tomb? How will we disassociate ourselves from the movie and media industry which is obsessed with violence and killing and get rid of the violent video games which give the message that violence and killing is somehow acceptable and even fun?

-who will stand up against the deaths from abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia and warfare?

-who will be truly pro-life across the board?

-who will stand up for the Prince of Peace who clearly came to bring us life?

That brings me to the final point of this message: THE WITNESSING.

- XVI. Praise God for those who are working for peace and justice around our world. We need more witnesses for peace in our world. Let me close with a word of witness from a true story as told by Chuck Colson several years ago on his radio program 'Break Point.'

-imagine this true scene in your mind's eye from a court room trial in South Africa following the demise of apartheid in that African country. A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is something over 70 years of age. Facing her from across the room are several white security police officers, one of whom, Mr. van der Broek, has just been tried and found implicated in the murders of both the woman's son and her husband some years earlier.

-it was indeed Mr. van der Broek, who had come to the woman's home a number of years back; taken her son, shot him at point blank range and burned the young man's body on a fire while he and his fellow officers partied nearby.

-several years later, van der Broek and his cohorts had returned to take away her husband as well. For many months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two

years after her husband's disappearance, van der Broek came back to fetch the woman herself.

- XVII. How vividly she remembered that evening, going to a place beside a river where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten, but still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as the white officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were: 'Father forgive them.'

-and now this black woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confession offered by Mr. van der Broek. A member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks: "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who so brutally destroyed your family?"

"I want three things", begins the elderly woman, calmly, but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

-she pauses. She continues. "My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly therefore for Mr. van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining within me."

"And finally", she says, "I want a third thing. I would like Mr. van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. van der Broek in my arms, embrace him, and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

- XVIII. As the courtroom assistants came to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. van der Broek, overwhelmed by what he had just heard...fainted. And as he did, those in the courtroom...friends...family...neighbors...all victims of decades of oppression and injustice...broke out in song, singing softly....'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.'

- XIX. Yes, Jesus is weeping over our world today just as he wept over Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday...saying to us: "If only you would do those things that make for peace." Who will break this cycle of violence in our world? Who will be a witness for Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and be a peacemaker in our world today? We don't need more people carrying guns...we need more people carrying the cross of Christ. Put your swords away and do those things which make for peace. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for THEY shall be called the children of God."

-that's where I want to cast my lot. I want to be a peacemaker and thereby be called a child of God. I am waving my palm branch today for King Jesus who came riding a lowly donkey to be the Prince of Peace who...chose Calvary's cross rather than to be a cavalry commander.