



Palm Sunday: "Show Us Your Grace in Our Confusion"

Wildwood Mennonite Church // April 5, 2020

Worship Leader: Audrey // Music Leader: Marg

*Jesus hears our mix of questions, expectations and disbelief
and offers salvation rather than judgment.*

Welcome to Wildwood

Welcome to this Palm Sunday service from across the street to wherever you are. We are not gathered together in our usual Palm Sunday fashion with children leading us with a parade of waving fronds. We don't resemble the noisy, cheering crowds that surrounded Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. We are sitting at our screens, in ones and twos and families, physically distanced in body but united in spirit. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says, "Where two or three come together in my name," (I dare say, even if by technology) "there am I with them." May we be blessed as we worship, together and separated.

Let us pray:

God of mercy, in the cold and snow of early spring,

We wait.

In lengthening days,

We wait.

In the darkening gloom of Lent,

We wait.

As we envision the crowds cheering Jesus,

We wait.

Did Jesus feel as alone as we've been feeling?

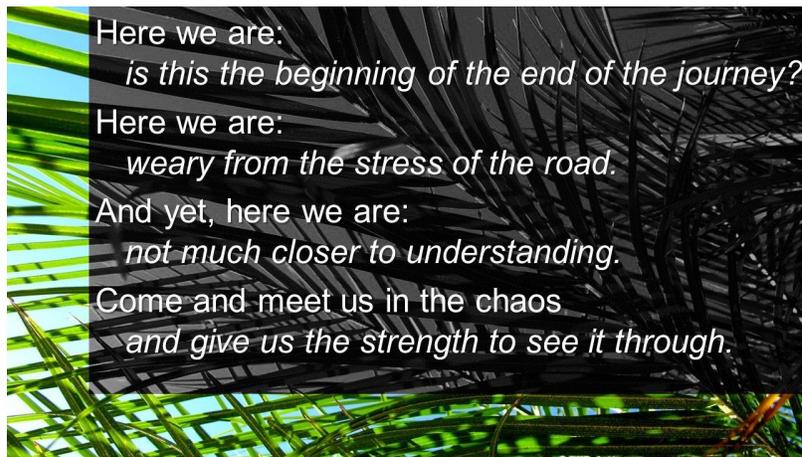
Did he wonder who was really there for him?

Today we claim your presence with us

As Jesus did, surrounded and alone, so long ago.

Amen

Music For Meditation // ["If You Believe" by Jim Brickman - a piano recording by Marg](#)



Scripture // John 12:12-19; 42-50(ish), adapted from [The Voice translation](#)

Narrator: Jesus and his friends spent the first night of the next Passover celebration at the house of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The next day, a great crowd of people who had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, so they gathered branches of palm trees to wave as they celebrated his arrival. The crowd shouted the words of an ancient Psalm (Psalm 118):

Crowds (shouting): *Hosanna! The One who comes in the name of God is truly blessed! This is the True King of all Israel!*

Narrator: Jesus found a young donkey, sat on it, and rode through the crowds mounted on this small beast. The Hebrew prophet had foretold of this day (Zech 9):

Zechariah: *“Daughter of Zion, do not be afraid. Watch! Your King is coming! You will find Him seated on the colt of a donkey.”*

Narrator: The disciples did not understand any of this at the time; they did not make these connections until Jesus had been fully revealed in his death and resurrection. As they reflected on their memories of Jesus, they realized these things happened just as they were written.

Those who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus enthusiastically spoke of Jesus to all who would listen, and that is why the crowd went out to meet Him. They had heard of the miraculous sign he had done.

Pharisees (to one another): *Our efforts to squelch him have not worked, but now is not the time for action. Look, the world is following after him.*

Narrator: After speaking these words, Jesus left the people to go to a place of seclusion.

Looking back after the fact, Jesus’ followers were amazed that even after all the signs Jesus performed, so many people did not believe what they saw in him, especially the religious leaders who should have understood. Yet many leaders secretly believed in Him but would not declare their faith because the Pharisees continued their threats to expel all His followers from the synagogue. They loved to please people and maintain their grasp on power more than they desired to glorify God.



But this is the message of Jesus:

Jesus: Anyone who trusts in me is not placing their faith in me, but in the One who sent me here. If anyone sees me, they see the One who sent me.

I am here to bring light in this world, freeing everyone who trusts in me from the darkness that blinds them. If anyone listening to my teachings chooses to ignore them, so be it: I have come to liberate the world, not to judge it. However, those who reject me and my teachings will be judged: in the last day, my words will be their judge because I am not speaking of my own volition and from my own authority. The Creator who sent me has given me what to say and speak. I know God's authority is eternal life, so every word I speak originates in God.

-----END SCENE-----

Song // [I Will Stand in the Congregation](#) // Sing the Story #113

Sharing Time // ["Hey Wildwood..." online sharing](#)

Not hearing from one another in person through the Sharing Time is a significant loss for many of us. It's not the same, but one way to express your grief, anxiety, prayer requests and gratitude is through the "Hey Wildwood" link above. If you're able, join us for our Sunday Morning Zoom gatherings, or check your email for the sharing items from last Sunday. Or maybe now would be a good time to pause your reading to call someone from church or elsewhere that you haven't heard from this week.

Congregational Prayer

God of love and kindness,

we pray that you would meet us in our isolation.

Though this is just the third Sunday since we could meet in the same physical space, it feels much longer.

Thank-you, God, for technology that allows us to see and speak with one another.

*Thank-you for the faith community that sustains us even while we are apart,
for phone calls and emails, Facetime and texts.*

Thank-you for the gift of time – time to reflect, time to re-evaluate our priorities, time for ourselves and for others.

We pause to express our thanks and joys to you.



God of understanding, we need patience: patience to live with what we cannot change, patience with ourselves and others. Give us patience for all that is beyond our control.

God of compassion, we bring to you our concerns and requests.

We pray for leaders around the world who need to make decisions in constantly changing circumstances. Give them wisdom, compassion and strength for the tasks.

We pray for health care workers who are in vulnerable positions and stretched to exhaustion.

We pray for others who are trying to keep communities safe.

We pray for those struggling with loss of jobs and incomes, that they may not lose heart.

We pray that those with financial means may have generous hearts.

We pray for all of us who are confined. Give us understanding for those in institutions where this is their life.

On this Palm Sunday when we are together in spirit, yet apart from one another, we thank you that Jesus showed us the way to life. We come to follow you together, with hosannas in our hearts. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Offering and Song // [O Breathe on Me, O Breath of God](#) // Sing the Journey #46

God, It's that time again when seasons change. We look at our wardrobes, our desk drawers, our freezers, and see what we have and what we need for the season to come. As we prepare our offerings, probe us to look at all of our wealth, to look at all that we have, what we truly need, and all that others may need for the season to come. Bless our gifts for your kingdom. Amen.

(from [CommonWord](#) resources)

Children's Story // [Click here for Video Storytime with Katharine!](#)

The book is [Breathe by Scott Magoon](#)

Sermon // "Backwards Faith" // Joe Heikman

(If you'd rather watch than read, [click here for the video version on youtube](#))

For the past 20 years, I've rarely left home without my calendar in my pocket. Back in the days before smartphones, I would always mark the start of a new school year by going to buy a new Brownline pocket calendar--not the day-planner, but the one with the whole month on each page. And then with great care I would copy over all the details from the old calendar to the new one. And every day, I'd slip that calendar into my pocket along with my wallet and keys.

I liked the sense of security that came with having my future planned out and written down. And it always felt very mature to be able to pull out my calendar and say things like, "well then let's choose a date to make sure that happens, I've got my calendar right here..."



Now that we all have our calendars in our smartphones, I'm not so unusual anymore. But that feeling of having a well-organized schedule, of knowing what's coming--I still like that.

I'm not the only one, for sure. Planning ahead is one of the key virtues of our society. "Be Prepared" is pretty much the official slogan of Canadian Winters. Not everyone operates that way, but we prepared folks do like to heap shame upon those who fail to prepare! And in our culture, having "no plans" pretty much means having "no life."

Or so it was. Until Covid-19. I still look at my Google calendar sometimes, but mostly it just sits there as a haunting reminder of what might have been. I haven't given up on our summer plans for family camping trips just yet... but we haven't bothered to book our campsites either. Because, well, who knows?

Who knows? Ugh. How do you feel about that level of uncertainty for the future? I mean, we all know that the future is unpredictable. I know that I can't control the future, but my calendar reveals my determination to try. Who knows what's going to happen? I hate that feeling.

That sense of uncertainty is what struck me this week in reading the Palm Sunday text from John 12.

You know the story, a great crowd goes out to welcome Jesus and name him the King of Israel. And Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a young donkey, the symbol of a ruler coming in to claim the city not with violent judgment but in peace.

"Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of YHWH!"

But that cheering was only part of the story.

For a while now, as the story of Lent has been building towards Holy Week, the gospel writers have been giving the sense that Jesus and the disciples knew where this thing was headed. They didn't know how it was all going to play out, but they knew that what they were doing was going to drive a confrontation with the priests and the religious leaders. They knew that the growing size of their crowds was going to get the attention of their Roman overlords.

So riding into Jerusalem, even though they were met with cheers this day, they were aware that going to Jerusalem meant bringing the conflict to a head. And Jesus is not avoiding that confrontation but rather doggedly seeking it out.

Jesus' friends could feel the rhythm of the future, but they had no control.



That's the feeling behind the Palm Sunday cheers, the sense of chaos, of an imminent cataclysm, of heading to a bad place but not knowing what that climax would look like and powerless to do anything about it. (Sound familiar? Maybe I'm projecting just a wee bit...)

Anyway, in the middle of all of this uncertainty, Jesus gives a speech about trust.

"Whoever trusts in me, trusts not so much in me as in the One who sent me; and whoever sees me, sees the One who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that whoever trusts in me need not remain in the dark anymore."

That speech actually comes at the conclusion of the story, and I'll have more to say about what it means in a minute. For now, let's just note that the writer of the story is framing this as a story about what it means to trust.

So let's have a look at the main characters of the story and what they show about trust.

First the obvious villains, the Pharisees. These guys trust no one but themselves, and although they claim to be people of faith, mostly they simply reject anything that doesn't fit into their carefully crafted system of beliefs. Jesus defied their expectations, so they did not trust him no matter what they saw, and they were ready to murder him to preserve their theology and their positions of power.

Another main character is the anonymous crowd. The writer says that these were the people attracted to Jesus because they had witnessed or heard about the resurrection of Lazarus. For them, trust was about signs, about the power that Jesus had proven to have. Which isn't a bad thing, that was why Jesus did so many signs in the first place, to attract a crowd.

But there was a limit to that kind of trust, as the story reveals.

Now, in John's gospel, the Palm Sunday story includes an unfamiliar tangent about some Greek Jews who had come to Jerusalem for Passover. They had heard the stories about Jesus and they wanted to talk with him.

Now the details are a bit fuzzy, but basically, Jesus takes the presence of these foreigners as a sign that yes, now is the time to reveal himself fully to the crowd. And so as he speaks to them, he prays: "Abba God, reveal your glory." And a voice from the sky answered him, "I have already revealed my glory, and I will yet revealed my glory again." Which is about as subtle as a neon sign saying "God's Glory, Right here - it's this guy!"

And that's where the story centers back on the cheering crowd, the ones who had been following Jesus because of signs like this one. But this time, they're confounded by what they've witnessed. That must have been thunder, some said. Others said, Oh, maybe that was the voice of an angel.



An hour ago, they wanted to make him their King, claiming that he was God's Chosen One. But now, when they hear God's affirmation of that claim, they're dodging it.

What happened to their trust? Well, when they actually listened to Jesus talk, what he said did not fit into their vision for a Kingdom. Jesus talked not about winning, but about dying. He made it clear that he had no intention of using his power to force his way to the throne. He had come to Jerusalem to die.

The crowd did not cheer that coronation speech. And when the very voice of God from the sky affirmed that this was indeed the plan, the crowd heard only thunder.

That's the trouble with belief based on signs, on proof. At some point, the evidence always runs out, or points to something unexpected. And when it did, the faith of the crowds turned out to be quite similar to the faith of the Pharisees. They, too, were invested in a particular vision of the future, and there wasn't room in their faith for something beyond that understanding. When trust in Jesus meant leaving that path, they kept their certainty and abandoned Jesus.

Certainty is not the same as faith. At some point, trust is about choosing even what you can't see, even what doesn't make sense to you.

That's my interpretation of Jesus' speech at the end of this story:

"Whoever trusts in me, trusts not so much in me, as in the One who sent me; and whoever sees me, sees the One who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that whoever trusts in me need not remain in the dark anymore."

Or in the Heikman paraphrase, *"You are able to trust in me because you're used to genuine trust in God. You see me the same way you see the God that you cannot see. When you see me, you're simply seeing in broad daylight the same thing that you've been seeing in the dark all along."*

Faith is choosing how to see what you see.

There is a final group of characters in this Palm Sunday story, the disciples. As I said, this group had a better sense than anyone else where this thing was headed. They did not like that future, but they could feel it coming.

What sets them apart in this story, though, is that their faith came not through looking forward, but by looking back. As happens often in the gospel stories, the writer points out that at the time, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was doing. It was only in looking back that they worked out the meaning of that day.



Preachers like me usually mock the disciples for missing what seems obvious in hindsight. But today, I wonder if that is not actually a better way of understanding how faith works - that it's less about the future and more about looking backwards to discover the meaning that wasn't clear at the time.

The gospel writers describe the disciples as rewriting their personal stories in light of new realities. They didn't have all the answers at the time; their perspective was quite limited. But rather than clinging to that perspective and rejecting everything that didn't fit into it, they acknowledged that there was stuff happening beyond their ability to see and understand. And that gave them space to stay close to what they did know of God, to stay close to Jesus, day by day, moment by moment, come what may.

They walked the path of trust forward one step at a time, and allowed their understanding to catch up later by working backward.

Now that is the opposite of what I like to do. My collection of pocket calendars are proof that I like to choose the kind of life I want in the future and then shape my present to live into that ideal moving forward.

Which is a nice plan, until a pandemic reveals the illusion. Turns out I'm not nearly so much in control. I don't understand what's coming nearly as well as I'd like to.

What I'm left with is the opportunity to admit my lack of control, to instead trust forwards and understand backwards. I can't force the future to conform to the meaning I want it to have, but I can choose to trust that meaning will develop as the present becomes the past.

Does that make sense (or have I been watching too much *Doctor Who* again)?

I'm not saying that there is some grand plan for all of this that we will one day understand why God sent this plague on the world. Not at all, I'm not saying that life is following some plan that will account for all of this, I'm saying that as we look back we will make meaning out of what has happened, no matter what happens.

What I'm suggesting is that my faith does not reveal or control the future, that trust is about shaping my response to whatever comes in a way that is consistent with my values, my understanding of God and my place in the story of the universe.

The future does not determine the validity of my faith, because I can only see that story as it takes shape and becomes the past. And that part is under my control, or at least subject to my choice for how I want to understand it.



So on Palm Sunday, trust is an invitation to hold on loosely to our preferred version of the future. The story does not need to go the way I want it to go for it to be a good story. I don't need to see my way to the end in order to live well right now.

What I can do is to choose to see the present in the light of faith, to take what I know of God and apply that to what is right in front of me today.

In these Covid-19 dominated days, our news and conversations are filled with projections and models of the future, predictions about how the pandemic will rise and hopefully how it will end, and how long the shutdown will last, forecasts about the economic and societal fallout.

As tools to help us make choices about our behaviours during the crisis, that future-focused thinking is helpful. We can and should shape our personal choices and our collective policies and procedures around the best information science can give us about likely outcomes of those choices.

But our faith is not in the future. Our models and predictions and even our preparations cannot tell us who we are and give meaning to what is happening.

Our well-being is not grounded in any particular version of the future, much less in our ability to control what will happen.

Our well-being is grounded in the goodness of God, in the love that sustains us in all things.

We can't know that for certain, and we do not have any guarantee that those truths will get us to the future that we would choose for ourselves.

But we can choose to trust, and in the choosing and trusting, like the followers of Jesus we will find that our stories are re-written, that looking back will reveal the meaning and purpose and belonging that we would wish for our future.

So let's hold on loosely to our calendars and our plans for the future. Let's remember that our well-being is not determined by the symbols we cling to to give us a feeling of control--our projections and indicators and institutions, our filled pantries and stockpiles of medical equipment, our insurance plans and savings accounts. Those are good things. But they are not the source of our salvation.

With the original followers of Jesus, we are entering a Holy Week. Anything can happen. We will certainly be surprised, and most likely horrified and devastated by some of what lies ahead.

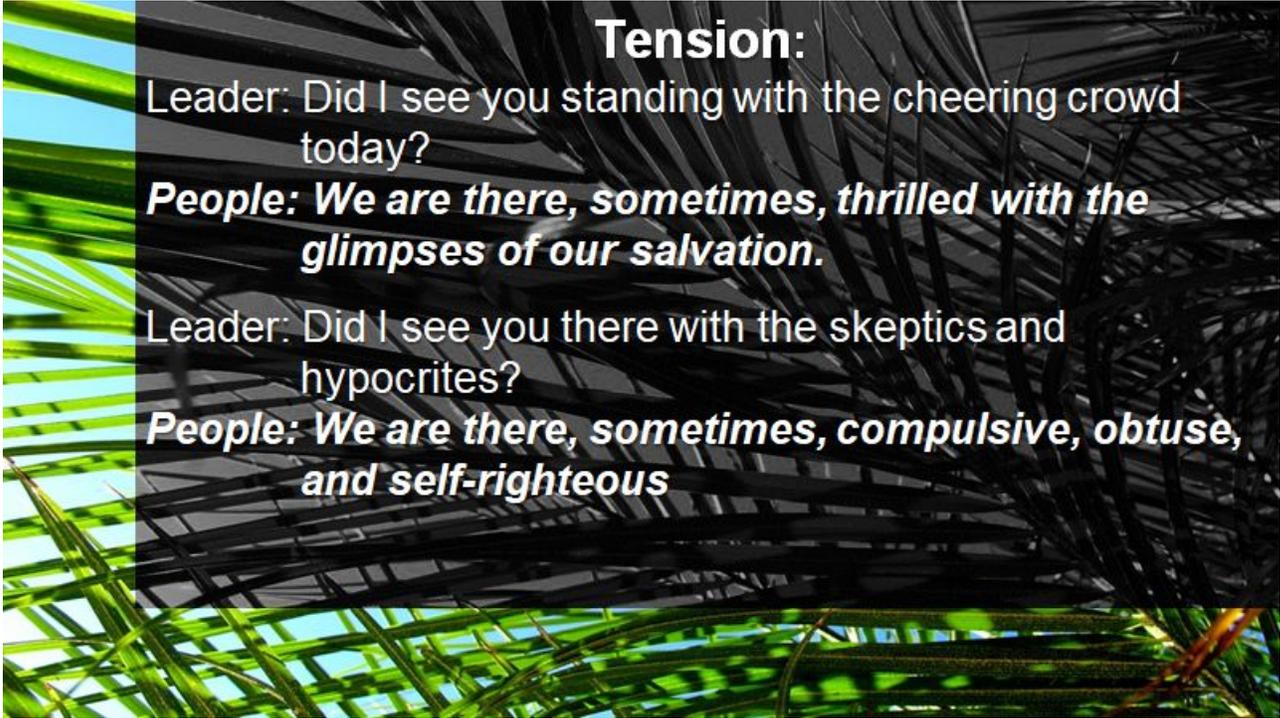
And yet, we can walk forward in trust and in hope. Not because we know where we're going, but because we choose trust and hope along the way.



Song of Response // *"Don't Be Afraid" by John Bell*

performed by the Easter Mennonite School Virtual Choir Project

Tension and Promise



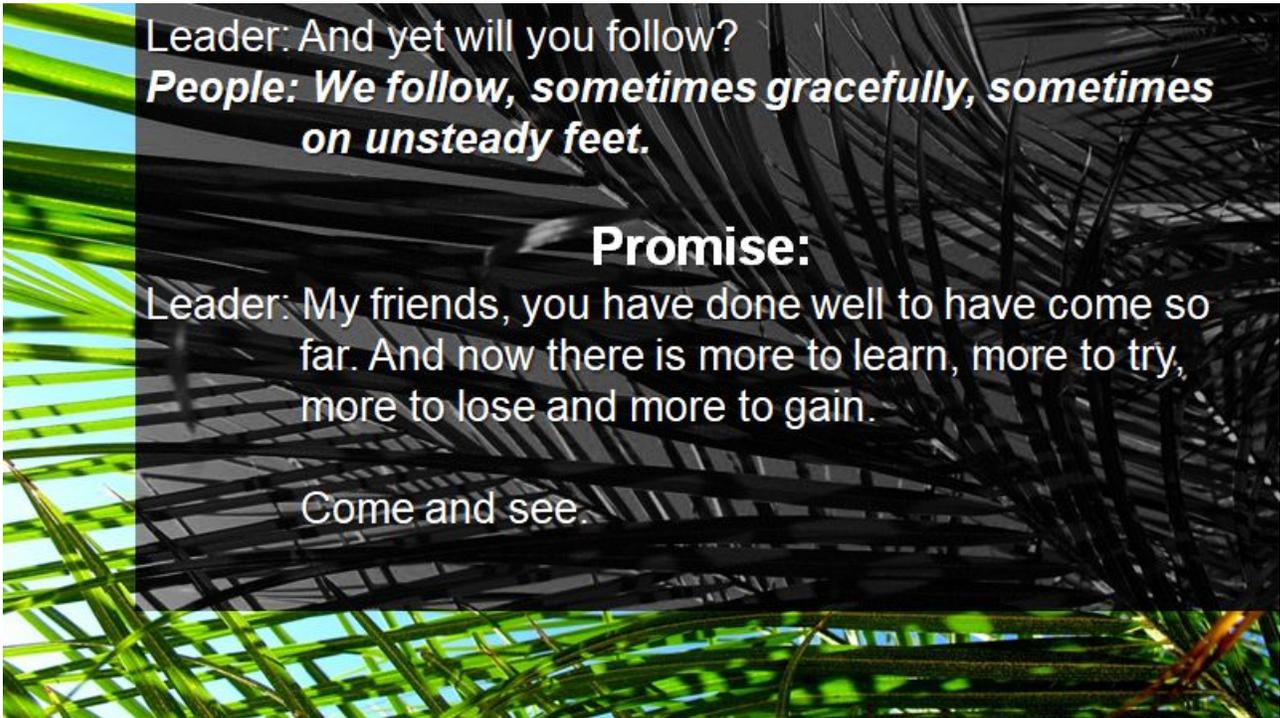
Tension:

Leader: Did I see you standing with the cheering crowd today?

People: We are there, sometimes, thrilled with the glimpses of our salvation.

Leader: Did I see you there with the skeptics and hypocrites?

People: We are there, sometimes, compulsive, obtuse, and self-righteous



Leader: And yet will you follow?

People: We follow, sometimes gracefully, sometimes on unsteady feet.

Promise:

Leader: My friends, you have done well to have come so far. And now there is more to learn, more to try, more to lose and more to gain.

Come and see.

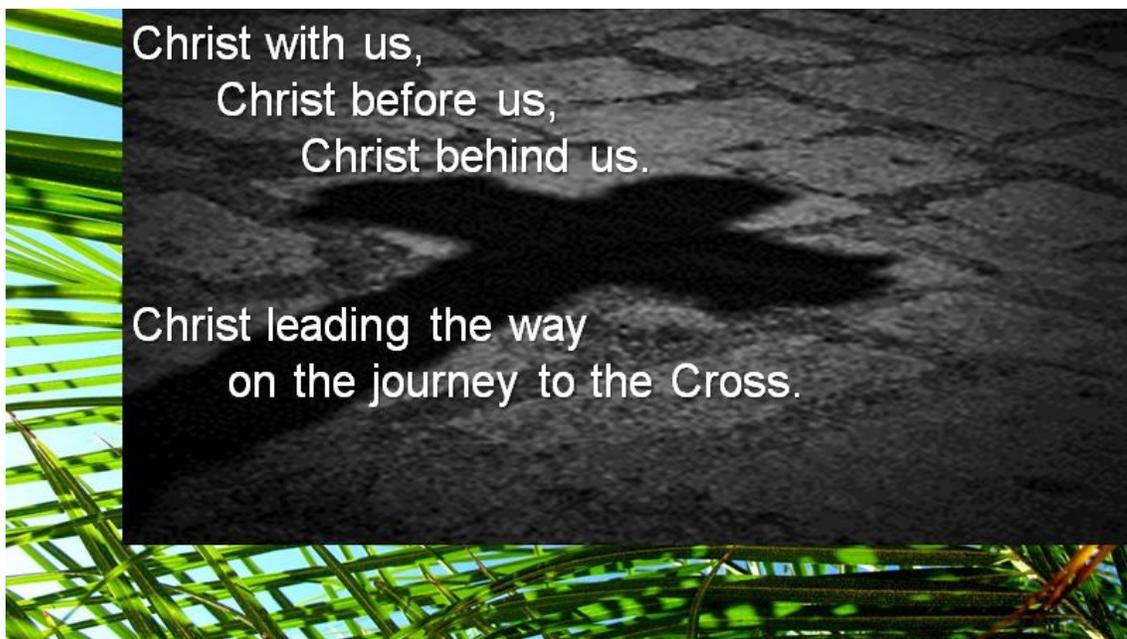
Song // [Be Still, God Will Fight Your Battles](#) // Sing the Journey #75

Once More On the Journey Into Darkness

Each step of Lent is a step into deeper darkness and a step towards Jesus.



Benediction



Christ with us,
Christ before us,
Christ behind us.

Christ leading the way
on the journey to the Cross.