

04-13-2025 Words of Worship

Welcome to all – in person, on-line, those viewing later... glad you're with us! This time, in this place, is for discovering hopeful surprises. Because our God is full of surprises – always acting in ways we don't expect, offering the kind of Love we don't expect, being a constant presence we forget to look for and this morning we'll hear again the story of Jesus' unexpected arrival into Jerusalem.

In a world where powerful people are mean and punitive, we have the example of power being shown with love. Our world shows us that to be winners we need to be greedy and manipulative. We take our strength from the One who leads with humility, whose source of strength is The Creator of all that is and whose loyalty to that creation is endless and sacrificial. In this time and in this place, we can rediscover and ground ourselves in Jesus' examples of how to live out Love and Compassion in surprising and challenging ways. Thanks be to God!

What do you have to **share with one another** this morning?

- Don't forget the Maundy Thursday service, a time of remembering Jesus' celebration of the Passover – when he explained God's *new* covenant to his confused disciples.
- And, next Sunday morning, of course, we'll celebrate God's biggest surprise of all! The return of life when only death seemed possible. We'll have a potluck breakfast beginning at 9:00, Sunday school for the children from 9:45-10:15 and the worship service of Easter Lessons and Carols at 10:30.
- MCC report?

Call to Worship

Prayer – God of the unexpected, be with us now as we worship you. Open our hearts and minds to your surprises. Amen. (close notebook and set to the side)

Morning Prayer –

God of life, we thank you and praise you for your many unexpected and often unrecognized miracles and wonders. We plant seeds and bulbs into the ground and in the darkness of their burial – when it seems as if they should be dead – they spring to life! We experience illness, broken bones, broken hearts, losses that don't seem possible to recover from. And yet, through the love of your people, through the care and know-how of doctors and counselors, through your Holy Spirit intervening and guiding, repair, forgiveness, wholeness becomes possible. Sometimes in ways we hadn't imagined, but it comes nonetheless. Give us eyes to see and hearts to embrace the ways that newness manifests in our lives.

An obvious way is through the birth of babies! We thank you, God, for the birth of two babies named Quinn! A little girl born to Brittany and Garrett Hiebert and a baby boy born to Jenna and Joe Yutzy Wenger. Be with these families as they adjust to all the new things these babies bring to their households and lives.

A change of location can bring new and unexpected blessings and challenges also! We ask for your blessing on Lois Janzen as she adjusts to her new surroundings at Bethesda. And we also ask for blessings on Darrell and Judy in their new duplex. Thank you for Bethesda Home and the comfort and care provided there.

O God, we pray for those we know and love who have health concerns. Be with each one and give the care and treatments that are needed through their doctors and others on the medical teams, through family and friends that come around them to offer strength and support. Help us all to be sensitive to the ways we can show your love.

We are grateful for another year of camaraderie, collaboration and caring offered through the Relief Sale! Revive those who are tired from their hard work. Restore those who will receive help from the funds raised. Renew your body of believers as they work together for this effort. May it bring to the light your upside down, surprising love.

God, we know that your Spirit is working, moving, changing things in this world all the time. But sometimes it feels hard to identify it, to maintain hope and courage and to keep on trying to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with you. Give us courage, give us creativity, give us conviction to respond to your call and to walk in your ways. We pray in Jesus' name.

Let's continue to worship God by giving our tithes and offerings.

Prayer – Giver of all good gifts, we thank you for your providence and care. We ask you to bless these gift and those who've given them. Bless ALL the gifts that are given and returned in response to your love. Amen.

Message – April 13, 2025 Eric Schrag

A humble protagonist, wishing for peace and non-violence, and being called to fight against the Roman

empire for the good of the masses who have embraced him as their savior.



Gretchen and I just watched the movie Gladiator 2 which is where this image comes from, and while watching this during the Lenten season it struck me that the hero of this movie, Lucius, was heralded as the savior of the people...he was their “hero”, standing up to the corrupt Roman empire and bringing hope to the disparaged.

Most of you are aware of the traditional arc of the hero's journey. An individual is in search of a defining purpose. The hero must navigate the painful trials of life, grow through the trials, and find their true self in the process. This arc resonates so clearly with us because it is often a similar path to the one that people find themselves on. We are searching for our own purpose. It is an old tale, observed, written about, and passed down through the stories and myths of every culture, religion, and society.

What at all of these “Hollywood” heroes have in common, and what I selfishly want in myself, are the heroic attributes: physical strength, confidence, charisma, wisdom, intellect. When we see these Hollywood heroes in action our own adrenaline surges as the hero enters the final climactic scene and

brings vindication to the oppressed, or when they tip the scales back to good. Who is not charged up as the theme from Rocky plays, and we picture the battered hero climbing to his feet, calling upon his last vestige of strength to overtake his oppressor. The movie loses a little of that adrenaline when the hero enters the final scene like this.



The upside-down King. Colliding with our expectations. Each year you hear a sermon about the King who rides in, not on the powerful white stallion adorned in noble military regalia, but rather on a donkey.

As Paul wrote in Philippians 2, “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

A triumphal entry of a “humble servant” riding on a donkey.

When I was in college, which in my head was last year, but in reality, was over thirty years ago, Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, wrote *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. That book was used in our religion classes. Wink’s book makes a case for active nonviolent action, and he uses Jesus of Nazareth. Again, **active** nonviolent action. Wink writes:

“Consistent with all that he has said and done, Jesus enters Jerusalem farcically, on a donkey. The church later read portentous meaning into this act on the strength of Zechariah 9:9 ((Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.)) (Matt. 21:5; John 12:15). But Mark and Luke make no reference to Zechariah, and may reflect something closer to Jesus’ intent: lampooning the Davidic kingship by paradoxical reversal. The human being who has no place to lay his head is the same “king” who owns nothing and must borrow—not even a horse—an ass! It is conceivable that Zech. 9:9 is already farcical, and that Jesus took his

inspiration from it. If he entered Jerusalem by the Horse Gate—it was on the east side, the direction from which Jesus was coming—the irony would be all the greater.” (113)

Wink’s point: In his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was apparently not so much fulfilling a prophecy, or perhaps even “doing God’s will,” as much as engaging in a form of street theater. According to Wink, this action, like many of Jesus’s actions, was a deliberate, calculated strategy to resist the Domination System. Wink speaks of entering Jerusalem through the Horse Gate, or the equivalent of the master entering the home through the slave quarters.

The example of Active non-violence that stood out to me as a student is Wink’s interpretation of Jesus’ command to “turn the other cheek” in Matthew 5:39. This is not, according to Wink, a call for passive nonresistance; rather it is a call for **active**, but nonviolent, resistance.

Wink’s argument is predicated on the following claims: (1) Jesus would have been speaking to the poor, who would have been accustomed to being struck by those in authority. (2) The statement presumes being struck with the back of the hand on the specified right cheek, because to strike with the fist or the open hand was—in that time and place--both to incur a hefty fine AND to imply that the person being struck was one’s equal. (3) The statement further assumes that the aggressor could not use his left hand, since that was considered unclean and one could be fined for using it to even touch another person. Given those assumptions, one can indeed strike the right cheek with the back of one’s right hand, but one cannot—at least not easily--strike the left cheek with the back of one’s right hand. So one must either use the open hand or fist, thereby implying that the recipient of the beating is one’s equal, OR one must use the left hand, thereby subjecting oneself to a fine. The most likely result, therefore, is that the aggressor would not strike the person a second time, but would walk away wondering what just happened, and the “Domination System” would have just received another blow. *Engaging the Powers* is full of such examples.

“He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

There doesn’t appear to be much emphasis on emptying oneself these days. We don’t see national leaders emptying themselves, or TV preachers, Athletes, even us as parents – As a pastor of a local Mennonite church once said, “Mennonites don’t worship God anymore, they worship their children!” our parenting and grandparenting styles don’t encourage much self-emptying. It sounds a bit like we

would much rather adapt the hero version of Hollywood than the self-emptying for of the hero Jesus. Did Jesus really mean what He said and was He really talking to us?

The lectionary this week talks of Christ colliding with our expectations. Expectations are funny. They influence how we see things; they influence how we see people, and they influence how we see ourselves. Our expectations are shaped by our experiences, our family, our desires, hopes and knowledge, and yet much of the time our expectations don't match reality. Here's an example.



Does anyone remember the strength shoes to help you jump higher? In high school, I used my hard earned, pizza hut wages to purchase a pair of these...which I think were over a \$100 back then. I would go to the Bethel track and do the suggested workout. My expectation was that by following this workout, I would jump like Michael Jordan – surprise! Come to think of it, I don't think I was ever even able to touch the rim!

The disciples *expected* Jesus the Messiah to be the hero king who would put an end to Roman rule, and bring freedom to the Jewish people. They expected our Hollywood version, the strong powerful King that would bring with him military force to conquer the Romans.

Just as our expectations can seemingly let us down, they also can be transformative in providing us with gifts, blessings and joys beyond our comprehension. The disciples did not get the “hero” they expected with stallion and sword. They did, however, as Wink helped to articulate, get the bold, transformative, and non-violent action hero that collided with expectation and tackled the oppressor. A dichotomy of humble servant and broad-shouldered victor with the courage and confidence to accept the slap on the cheek, knowing full well that by turning his head was thwarting oppression.

The older I get the more my “expectations” collide. My youthful anticipation of Palm Sunday has been tempered with the reality of Good Friday. My joyous shouts of “Hosanna” have been silenced by my recognition of my own chants of “crucify Him”.

And yet, how much better the Christ that came, than the Christ we expected? In Gladiator 1 the hero was Maximus and he was coming to do the same thing that his son, Lucius was doing in Gladiator 2 – so it clearly didn't work. Their heroic efforts did not make lasting, or life altering change. If Jesus rode in

on a giant white war horse and slayed the evil dragon of Roman Rule, the disciples might have felt the same reprieve that our own “political wins” bring, and I think all of us can say triumphantly that we would much rather have the eternal life that Christ brings.

Expectations are funny. If you hadn’t yet been taught...and you saw this:



would you expect this:



Thank you for your children’s story this morning, Renae, and the thoughtful and proactive way you connected children’s stories across the entire calendar year. Those bulbs have provided a lot of “highlights” this past week. Renae gave some bulbs to Gretchen when Gretchen’s mom passed away this past year. It was a very meaningful tribute to Gretchen’s mother who loved the spring, gardening and flowers and what a special feeling to see the tulips arrival in our back yard. Those bulbs, so simple, represent a powerful example of the life-giving power of Christ, most especially as we enter this holy week.

In our countless trips to the theater, clothing store, in our political obsessions we can see our expectations for Christ mirrored by the disciples. We love Jesus the humble servant, and yet we aspire to the cultural confident outspoken hero. Like the disciples, we need to take off our clouded lens and see that Jesus entered Jerusalem, not as the sheepish humble servant, riding a donkey but rather, God in human form showing us the powerful, life altering example of what we can become.

Many of you know C.S. Lewis the famous author. For those in our congregation when Pastor Caleb was here, you know Caleb referenced him on occasion. The very brief history is that C.S. Lewis was born in the church, fell away, espousing Atheism and then like the apostle Paul returned to Christianity becoming a fervent advocate. In 1942 C.S. Lewis wrote: “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”

I like this. It takes courage to love, to be patient and kind, to be good and faithful, to be gentle and have self-control. Courage is not the glamorous Hollywood moments, nor is it about perfection. Courage is

who you are when no one is watching, when the rewards aren't guaranteed, when the outcomes are unpredictable.

Some people are talented, they don't need strength shoes to dunk a basketball, some people are intelligent, some people are charismatic, some people, Like Jason Peters have awesome muscular calves and he sits by me in choir showing them off when I work calves weekly and have for the past two years!, but that isn't the point – every one of us can be courageous. Every single day, we can choose how we show up when tested. Like the courage to turn the other cheek. Like the courage to enter a prison and visit (Frieda Flaming),

Like the courage to give generously to charitable causes when your retirement account is down, like the courage to engage in active resistance, however that might look to you, to decisions and people that are the oppressor.

Our challenges are not getting any easier – be they personal (our health, relationships, finances) – be they the polarizing nature of politics – be they the shrinking demographic of the Mennonite Church. Christ came to show us, in unexpected ways, the courage to embrace, and overcome our challenges. We can collide with our own expectations about what our voice, our actions, our thoughts, our prayers can do – we sell ourselves short.

It takes courage to let this upside-down King's rule guide our life and decisions. Let us boldly, with courage, follow Christ's example and collide with our expectations because we know that Easter is coming, and with it, the transformative gift that provides endless, unexpected heroic courage.

Benediction – Expect the unexpected! Keep your eyes and ears open and your hearts soft. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God and with one another. Amen.