

FORTY DAYS OF DECREASE: FASTING SPECTATORSHIP

John 12:1-19

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It's Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. You are there. For a few years now you've heard a lot about this man from Nazareth whom some believe is the Messiah. He heals sick people, enables the lame to walk, gives sight to the blind and helps those covered with leprosy to be healed and clean again.

Recently you've been told that he raised a man from the dead. He wasn't in a coma. He wasn't sleeping. He was dead and sealed in a tomb for 3 days before he walked out alive again.

Only someone who possesses the power of God could do such things. He just might be the Messiah, the one your grandfather mentioned would come to earth someday and save his people. This man is coming to your town today. Naturally you don't want to miss this event. So, you are among the crowd who is anxious to greet him, eager to get a look at him.

People have lined up along the road just to get a glimpse of him. They hold palm branches in their arms. As he approaches the excitement builds. Some waving palm branches toss them into his path. Others spread out their coats in front of his donkey. You get caught up in the excitement and on impulse you toss your coat in his path. As you quickly lay it out, then step back, you look at him, at Jesus, and he makes eye contact with you. As you gaze into his eyes a shiver runs through your body. You swear he could see all the way into your soul. No one has ever looked at you that way before.

And just as quickly he moves past you. You recover your coat, dusty, torn in a couple of places. You still can't believe you did it, threw your coat like that. But you just got caught up in the moment. Something made you do it. What was that? And now, what will you do next? Will you go back to being you, back to who you were: Will you be a spectator or will you be something more?

A spectator is an observer of an event. It is an eyewitness, an onlooker. It is someone who allows the event to happen, perhaps enjoying the event, then allows the event to pass them by, allows the event to be over without ever actually getting involved.

In describing the events of Palm Sunday, author Alicia Chole (40 Days of Decrease) suggests there were 3 groups of people there that day. There were those who followed Jesus closely, before and after that day. The disciples were among that group.

There were those who got caught up in the events of the day. The crowd grew larger and more enthusiastic as Jesus rode through the streets of Jerusalem.

And, of course, we know there were those scribes, Pharisees, and rulers who did not believe Jesus was who they said he was. They denied he was God's son, denied he was the Messiah and so they looked for a chance to be rid of him.

Let's assume you are part of the second group. Remember the first group were disciples and original followers of Jesus. He directly invited them to join him and become fishers of men. And the third group were those who clearly stood in opposition to and openly spoke against Jesus and his developing movement. Many of those who were against Jesus were people who possessed authority and power and control. Jesus was a threat to them.

Group two seems to fit with who we'd be in the scenario, right? It fits with who we are. We're not one of Jesus' original, closest followers but we aren't against him. As a matter of fact, we are here, today, aren't we? That means that Jesus matters to us, right? It suggests that for most if not all of us we have had some sort of Jesus moment in our lives. We had an encounter with him, perhaps more than one, in which he suddenly became real to us.

Maybe we had a parent or Sunday School teacher who made us realize that we were important to Jesus, that Jesus knew our name, that Jesus was always with us.

Perhaps we had an experience on a retreat where we suddenly embraced the depths of Jesus' love for us. We were able to consider everything Jesus has done for us and is doing still. We were able to embrace his forgiveness of us for sins we've committed no matter how severe they were. He is able to erase sins in our lives the

memory of which would normally have kept us away from God, sins that we thought made God not want anything to do with us. But then we understood that he loves us so much that he sent his son to suffer and die for us.

Maybe we were very sick or down on our luck and a friend came and stood by our side. They reminded us of God's presence in all things. God's power to listen to our prayers when our hearts hurt the most.

Perhaps it was an encounter with God during Confirmation class. You spent 9 months focusing on Jesus, God, the Bible, the Church. Some of it you heard before, a lot of it was new. But at some moment Jesus came alive to you. You felt different inside, convinced he knew who you were and wanted to be part of your life, confident that he's held you in his hand all along.

That's how I felt when it happened to me. It happened to me at Jumonville, at a camp when I was a counselor. I'll never forget that moment. I knew God knew who I was. I knew God cared about me.

At the beginning of this message I suggested that you were in the crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. I suggested that you got caught up in the crowd's enthusiasm who thought they were seeing the Messiah. I said that you threw your coat in his path as your way to honor him, to respect him, to welcome him to your community. Do you remember what I said next?

I said that as you lay out your coat, then step back, you look at Jesus and Jesus looks at you. You make eye contact with Jesus and as you do a shiver runs through your body. You swear Jesus could see all the way into your soul.

He saw you. He acknowledged you. Jesus recognized you. You are one for whom he came; one for whom he would die. You are one of his own; one he loves with all his heart.

I'm suggesting that has happened for most of us in some way or another, a moment when Jesus becomes real to us. Perhaps more importantly, a moment when we realize that we have become real to Jesus, that he knows us and cares about us and is at work in our lives, aware of our circumstances.

So, when that happens, what do we do with that? What happens next? In her book, “40 Days of Decrease”, Alicia Chole considers the reaction of the religious leaders to the crowd’s enthusiasm over Jesus. “Teacher rebuke your disciples!” Do you remember how Jesus replied? He said, “If they keep quiet, the very stones will cry out.” (Luke 19:39-40)

I love that response. Think about what it means! It means you can’t stop where this is going. It means this thing that’s happening is a moment of God. It means that this thing has and will invade all the corners of the universe. Our choice? Get on board or watch it pass us by.

She, the author, suggests that the celebrating is too wild, too organic, too out of their control. She writes:

So they refused to enter in and sacrificed joy to something they deemed greater – be that propriety, suspicion or perhaps jealousy.
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She’s talking about the religious leaders who opposed Jesus. But then she asks of herself:

I wonder if I too would have paused because I am by nature overly cautious...At times, the combination of troubleshooting, discernment, and introversion reduces me to a spectator rather than a participant.
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Then she offers these words of encouragement:

Today, fast spiritual spectatorship. Enter into worship. When considerations start turning into hesitations about something Jesus is clearly at the center of, throw hypercaution to the wind and celebrate Jesus with abandon. P. 67

Fast spiritual spectatorship. Enter into worship. Celebrate Jesus with abandon. Did you get that?

When I decided that spectatorship would be a topic for this week’s message, I thought about people standing around, needing to get involved, needing to do

more. But it's more than that. Before that it begins with worship. It begins with celebrating Jesus with abandon.

Each week we gather to worship God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do that because we want to, we want to praise God and express our gratitude to God. We worship because we need to. It's been a rough week, a long week. We've seen Satan working in lots of places and we've searched for God in these places as well. We need to worship because we need to be reassured that God is still God, still on the throne, still in control of the universe.

And we worship because we long to. Something inside us makes us want to worship God. It's inherent to us. I've been watching this show on the BBC called Planet Earth II. It's channel 1225 on Comcast. It's on Sundays at 9 PM. It's amazing and of course it enhances my amazement at the wonders of God's creation. I'm fascinated by the things animals do that are instinctive: eating, reproducing, defending intruders, fleeing danger, fighting to survive, protecting offspring, nurturing their young. We who are of the highest order of God's creation do all of that. But we also possess this deep desire to worship the one who created us. It's instinctive. It's in our DNA

When we worship God, we reestablish order to our universe. We put God back on the throne. We remember this is God's world. God is awesome! God is amazing! God is incredible.

When we worship, we celebrate that we are God's children. We celebrate that we know the Lord of the Universe, the King of Kings and The Lord of Lords. We celebrate what God has done for us. Plagued by a sinful nature that leads us to poor thoughts, actions and behaviors that separate us from God, God gives us his son to restore our salvation, to assure us of his love.

That's why worship is so important to me. That's why I want us to be a place that has great worship. Because we're grateful to God and because God deserves it. That's why I want you to sing the hymns and songs and why I want you to sit closer and why I want you to invite people to come and why I want lots of people to attend because when there are more of us we sing more courageously and passionately and we sound better to God and that honors God.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness,
Come before him with joyful songs.
Know that the Lord is God.

There's another reason why I want us to worship passionately and from our hearts. It prepares us for heaven. We will worship God in heaven, all the time. We won't do missions or evangelism or go to work. We will worship God.

Fasting spectatorship does include doing more as well. As a believer, you are part of the greatest movement in all of history. Knowing Jesus has impacted you and made you a different person. What God has done for you should lead you to enable God to do that for others.. Fasting spectatorship also means we are active in serving. It is also an act of honoring God.

There is no question that churches thrive when their people serve God in and through the church. Churches excel when people are so grateful for who God is, for what God has done, for the gift of Jesus Christ, that their lives are changed and they begin to take on the character of Christ. That's what happened to the disciples. That's what happened in the churches from then until today. That's what's happening in your life as well. Churches thrive when their people are so transformed by what God has done for them that they take on the character of Christ and they serve.

For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So, I call upon you to fast spectatorship. Don't be a spectator. Don't stand idly by watching as others worship and serve. Praise God for who God is to you and what God has done for you. Sing boldly, courageously. Tell God how awesome he is. He loves to hear that, especially from you.

And, now that you know why you should serve and who you are serving, serve unselfishly. The world needs to know about Jesus.

