

# EMBRACE

Week #5 of a 6-Week Lenten Series, "Prepare the Way"

Palm Sunday: April 2, 2023

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So how many people have ever had to have a difficult conversation -- a difficult but important conversation -- and you did everything you could to avoid having that conversation? [Congregation laughs] Anybody ever avoid? How many people have ever had something that you really wanted to do, or that you knew was good and important for you to do, but was so hard you didn't do it? Anybody? And last one: How many people have ever run away from a problem instead of facing it? Anybody ever do that?

You know, the fact is that sometimes life gets challenging. Sometimes life can be painful and scary and overwhelming. And in those times, sometimes we would rather avoid those situations and difficult and uncomfortable moments rather than face them and go through them. Sometimes we'd rather escape or run away than actually feel those difficult feelings and experience those difficult experiences. I'll bet every single one of us has probably at least one thing in our lives now that we would rather avoid having to deal with than to face.

It kind of reminds me of this guy's voice mail, and it said, "*Hi! This is Bill. I'm probably home; I'm just avoiding someone I don't like. Leave a message and if I don't call back, it's probably you that I'm avoiding.*" [Congregation laughs]

So today is Palm Sunday. Today is the day that we honor Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem with the people waving and cheering and putting down cloaks and branches and singing, "*Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest heaven!*"

Palm Sunday is really the beginning of Holy Week. And it is Jesus' entrance that really triggered -- and was the catalyst -- for all the events that needed to happen to culminate in the miraculous resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate on Easter.

The thing that has always impressed me -- and every year inspires me -- about Palm Sunday is that Jesus knew that the Pharisees were plotting against him. He knew that he was in danger; he knew that people would turn on him; he would be betrayed; that he would experience injustice and torture and pain and death. He knew it would take everything he had to walk through this experience. And yet, he still chose to enter Jerusalem.

I mean, he was actually warned to not go back to Jerusalem. He could have fled into obscurity; he could have been safe in Nazareth. He could have laid low and continued to give sermons and teach God's laws. And even though he had several options to escape, he knew that entering Jerusalem was what he was supposed to embrace, not avoid. That it was something he absolutely had to do to give the full expression to the Christ that he was and proving the resurrecting power of God.

I believe that the example that Jesus gave us on Palm Sunday is a personal lesson for all of us in how to step in and embrace the difficult and challenging moments in our lives: the things that scare us; the things that are tough; the things that we would rather not do ... but knowing that they are an important and vital part of becoming the person we came to be and to fulfill our divine potential.

The American spiritual mystic Joseph Campbell said:

*"The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek."*

The situations that we are afraid of doing; the conversations that we're afraid of having are the very things that hold the treasure that we seek! Sometimes we avoid the treasure by not wanting to have these difficult experiences and not step into them or face them.

Now, there are some things in life we need to avoid, but I'm talking about the kind of avoidance that we know is good and important and necessary for us, and are uncomfortable, but if we are willing to do it, will bring forth greater things for us.

We're in Week #5 of our six-week Lenten series called, "Prepare the Way." And we've been focusing on Jesus' 40 days of prayer and fasting where he prepared himself for his ministry and the miraculous events that occurred. And it's an illustration to us that we need to do our inner preparation -- our spiritual work -- to create a spiritual foundation to spring forth a greater version of ourselves. For us to have a transformation and a breakthrough in our lives.

In Week #1 our word and our practice for a breakthrough was **RETREAT**. That sometimes you need to step back and reflect. Sometimes you give yourselves some space and quiet and just connect with your breath; connect with your higher self.

Week #2 we talked about **FASTING**: that is to abstain from food ... but not just abstaining from food but abstaining from things that really suck our energy so we can reinvest it in greater ways. We talked about abstaining from food but also from negativity and clutter and utilizing that energy that's freed up to deepen our spiritual practice.

Week #3 was about **FEASTING** our minds and hearts on God and God's love, particularly compassion and kindness to all people.

Last week we talked about **BELIEVING**: to believe that, with God, all things are possible; to believe our lives have a purpose; and especially to believe in ourselves.

And so today we're going to look at the next practice to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough, and that is to **EMBRACE**. And so there are three things we're going to talk about embracing to help us have a breakthrough.

The first one is: You've got to **BE WELCOMING OF WHAT IS BEFORE US**. How many people have a situation -- or ever had a situation in your life -- that you wish was not in your life? [Congregation murmurs] Every one of us has some things that we absolutely just don't like. And we say things like, "*I don't want this! This isn't what I signed up for! This doesn't make sense; how could this have happened? Why did this happen? This isn't right! It's wrong! I deserve better than this!*" [Congregation laughs]

Sometimes we would rather reject or deny or wish we could just throw it back or give it to someone else than actually welcome and embrace the things that are in our lives, particularly the difficult and challenging ones. We sometimes spend more time thinking that it is some divine error; or some cosmic snafu; thinking we maybe spiritually got "punked" or pranked. [Congregation laughs] And we spend a lot of time moaning and whining about things in our lives. And it does absolutely no good!

Because here's the reality and the absolute fact: If it is in your life, it is meant to be there for a reason. And the reason is to help us! To help us grow; help us heal; help us learn; help us expand; and help us express the fullness of that God Spirit in us.

Rabindranath Tagore once said:

*"To find God, you must welcome everything."*

Isn't that horrible? [Congregation laughs] To find God, you must welcome everything. And so the good things; the challenging things; the beautiful things; all things. To truly know the depths of God, we must

welcome and embrace and accept and own all aspects of our lives ... not thinking it's a mistake, but realizing it is there for a purpose and a reason for our growth. That it is there as part of our soul's journey. A part of our spiritual fulfillment.

Jesus, in John, Chapter 12, Verse 27 and 28, says this:

*"Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."*

And Jesus is saying here, *"I'm scared. But should I just give up?"* And he says to himself, *"No! God has called me to this. This is my work to do."* In Gethsemane he had another weak moment, but was willing to welcome it. In Gethsemane he said, *"Father, if you can, take this cup from me. But not my will, but Thy will be done."*

Again, he's saying, *"This is hard. But I know this is mine to do."* I'll be every single one of us is very clear that that was Jesus' work. It was his work to do; it was his work to step into Jerusalem. We all believe that. But the question is: Can we believe that whatever is difficult in our lives right now is there for us? Is ours to do? That it will help us make our next spiritual step?

Sometimes we would rather avoid things. But you know what? When we avoid struggle; avoid pain; avoid difficult situations, we're avoiding life! We're avoiding growth! We're avoiding having a deeper and richer experience of God and life and love. Avoidance actually robs us of the wisdom and the lesson and the growth and the awareness that it is meant to give.

So I ask you: In your life, what are you avoiding? What are you avoiding saying that needs to be said? What are you avoiding doing that needs to be done? What are you avoiding accepting or being aware of or being honest with yourself about? And the question is: Are you willing to accept it; own it; embrace it; and welcome it as a part of your next spiritual step? As a part of your life?

As we begin to accept, embrace and welcome, we realize that the circumstances of our lives are the exact circumstances we need to grow and expand and build a better version of ourselves. Instead of lamenting or hating or regretting, we need to welcome and embrace all aspects of our lives.

There was a time for me, after my life changed unexpectedly, that I had a hard time accepting my life. Accepting myself; accepting my body. It took a long time and a lot of work for me to get to a place to say, *"This is my life. This is my body. And everything in my life is a gift from God and is here to help me and to bless me."*

We all have things that we don't like or wish were different. But the only way to know the fullness of God and to bring forth the best in ourselves is to face all; to accept all; and welcome all. So what is it in your life that is before you that your humanness would rather not handle, but your soul knows it's time to embrace it and fully welcome it and to move through it? The first step -- if we want to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough -- is to embrace by welcoming whatever is before us.

The second thing is to **BE WILLING**. Even when we now something is good for us, sometimes we still don't want to do it. And when it's something we don't like, we're even more resistant and more reluctant and more rigid.

How many people here have ever been unwilling? Anybody ever been unwilling? [Congregation laughs] Unwilling to listen? Unwilling to change? Unwilling to see something from somebody else's perspective? Ever been unwilling to talk to somebody? Unwilling to forgive them? Ever been unwilling to go to the gym and exercise? [Congregation laughs] Or unwilling to go and make a doctor's appointment or go and ask for help? There's a lot of ways that we human beings can be unwilling!

In the book, *The Way of Transformation*, Karlfried Durkheim says this. He says:

*"The way of transformation is to willingly open ourselves. It is to not play safe; it is to not be closed off but to open ourselves fully to all the situations of life. Only that person that is willing to risk themselves and expose themselves to life -- only they can have that which is indestructible rise up within them."*

We've got to be willing! Remember when Peter and some of the disciples were in the boat and there was a storm? And Jesus was walking on the water. And Peter shouted out, "Hey, Lord; if that's really you, call me out." And Jesus said, "Come," and Peter stepped out of the boat on to the water. And as long as he looked at the Christ, he stayed above the water. But then when he looked at the crisis -- looked at the storm -- he began to sink in it and he had to get back in the boat.

But the thing I loved about Peter is that: This is the same Peter that Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." You know why? Because he was always willing to test his faith. He was always willing to try. He was always willing to step out of the boat of his comfort zone to expand himself spiritually.

Willingness is powerful and important stuff! We cannot have change without being willing. We can't transform; we can't learn. We cannot achieve greater things without being willing.

Jesus' willingness I think is expressed in a subtle, but important way. Jesus could have entered Jerusalem on a horse: on a powerful horse. But instead, he entered on a donkey: a simple animal; a peaceful animal. You see, he didn't enter aggressively, arrogantly, angrily. He didn't enter rushing in and ready to kick butt and take names. [Congregation laughs] Although that would have been interesting to see, I would have to say! [Congregation laughs]

He entered willingly. He entered humbly. He entered gently, because he knew the best way to embrace a challenging situation was not trying to force things, but it was to be willing. Willing to open ourselves fully to God. He really demonstrated the words in Zachariah 4:6 that say:

*"Not by might; not by power; but by my Spirit," says the Lord."*

That is absolutely about being willing. The only way for Spirit to come forth from us is our own willingness to open ourselves fully to God. The only way for more love to be expressed from us is to open ourselves to willingly allow God's love to flow through us.

In the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 1, Verse 19, it says:

*"If you be willing and obedient, you shall eat of the good of the land."*

Willingness is a key element and practice to open ourselves to the riches and the goodness and the blessings of God. So where in your life are you being a little rigid? Or are you being a little closed off? Or trying to force things to happen? And where in your life would it help you to be more willing? To be willing to open yourself to God? To be willing to step out of the comfort zone that you're in? To be willing to expand your faith and test out?

The second important practice for us to embrace and to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough is that we must be willing! And if you're not willing, be at least willing to be willing. [Congregation laughs] Because willingness is absolutely a vital component of having a breakthrough and transforming.

And the last thing is **to BE THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF GOD**. Scripture says, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." When it says "name" there in the Bible, name means your nature. Blessed is the one who comes in the nature -- or the consciousness -- of God. Jesus entered with a higher level of consciousness; a high level of purpose and intention for him being there. He entered triumphantly; he entered prayerfully; he entered spiritually with his head held high. Calm, centered and grounded in

Spirit; that is how he entered that situation. Difficult and challenged, he was absolutely centered in a higher level of consciousness about his own purpose; about his own intention.

Have you ever entered a situation and your mindset was angry or fearful? Or your mindset felt like you were powerless? Or you felt like you were unworthy? Jesus might have been humble, but he didn't play small. He showed up with a higher level of consciousness, higher than the actual details of the situation. And he knew that he and God could handle anything that was before him! He was centered in that mindset. Again, a higher consciousness; higher sense of purpose; and a higher intention.

So let me give you a couple of people to show you how important a God consciousness and a higher consciousness and purpose is when you're going through a tough situation. I've mentioned it many times, but Nelson Mandela -- it's hard not to idolize this guy and be amazed by him. Twenty-seven years in prison. Twenty-seven years in prison! And he came out of prison after 27 years at 72 years old, I believe he was. He wasn't bitter; he wasn't angry. He was actually very peaceful and centered. He became the president -- first president of his country in a full democratic election at 75. He served for five years. An amazing statesman; incredible!

And the reason that this happened? Because even in prison, he had a high level of consciousness. Of unifying his country; of bringing equality; and eliminating racism and apartheid. And so the thing is: In prison, his consciousness was high. He wasn't dwelling on what was going on there; he was holding a higher intention and it literally changed and transformed his country. He is seen all over the year as an incredible statesman for what he did. And why? Because of the consciousness he held. It's the higher purpose and the higher intention he held.

Another example is a guy named Ron Black. I've mentioned him; he was a congregant here. And he was a musician; he loved music. And he gave me some guitar lessons. But he thought I was more talented than I was for some reason ... Because he would play this funky guitar riff. And he said, "*You go ahead and try it; why don't you practice that?*" And he'd play all these songs: "*How about this song? How about this song?*" And he'd play and I would just watch this man just playing music in pure joy, just one thing after the other. And it was like a mini concert. I didn't even bother trying to practice, because he was just so into playing whatever songs. And I just loved that about him.

And I didn't realize it at the time, but he had cancer. He had a great girlfriend and a daughter. He would bike and he would do all kinds of things; had such a joyful spirit. And the cancer started growing. We'd have our guitar lessons once a week. And over time, it was just joyful and joyful.

And then one day he collapsed, and he was in the hospital. And so I ended up going to see him. And his girlfriend was there. And his eyes were closed. And as I walked up to the bed, his eyes opened. And he said, "*Richard, I've got some bad news.*" And I said, "*What's that?*" He said, "*Your guitar lesson's cancelled this week.*" [Congregation laughs] And we started to laugh our butts off. It was so hilarious!

And you know what his goal and intention was? He said, "*I'm going to die well. And the best way to die well is to live well!*" And I tell you, that was his consciousness in that difficult situation. Like Mandela, his consciousness was higher: about freedom and equality, even though he was in prison. Your consciousness rules! The higher your consciousness, things begin to change and transform.

With Ron, we did something that I've only experienced once, and that was a "Living Memorial." In the hospice place, he was there in a wheelchair -- cancer in his lungs; cancer in his brain; spinal cord; everywhere -- and yet, we got to pay tribute to him. Shared some laughs and, of course, his buddies were jamming and playing music. And it was one of the most amazing things! What a legacy to leave! Even in the midst of dying of cancer and dying way too early, he left an incredible gift. Why? It was his

consciousness. It was a higher purpose; a higher intention; and a higher level of awareness he had. Regardless of what the situation is, consciousness absolutely rules.

So I ask you: In a situation that isn't as comfortable, what is a higher consciousness you can get to? What is a higher sense of purpose? Or a higher sense of intention that you could hold for whatever it is that you're going through?

Ralph Marston is a great spiritual writer. And here is a quote of his that I love that demonstrates the level of consciousness that I'm talking about. He said:

*"The fact that there is still work to be done, many obstacles still to be overcome, is no reason to be dismayed. Because the moments will come; you will them with effort and value, and life will grow increasingly richer as a result.*

*The assumption that effort is something to be avoided is simply not true. Wishing for a life free of challenges is wishing for something you really would not want if you could ever get it. Look back at where you've come from and you will understand. You'll see that the times which have brought you the most value and richness were the times that demanded the most of you.*

*Enjoy the challenges; find joy in the effort, in the living and in the giving. The moments when much is asked of you is moments when much is given to you.*

*What an incredible, priceless opportunity it is to be able to work, to learn, to grow, to accomplish, and to drink in all of the richness along the way. There is always work to be done and there is no better way for things to be."*

Challenges: we all have them! But the question is: Are we willing to embrace them? Are we willing to welcome them? Are we willing to own and say, *"This is mine! This is what God is calling me to do to help me fulfill my divine potential."*

And we've got to be willing: willing to believe; willing to follow; willing to step out of our comfort zones to fully express and demonstrate our spiritual greatness. And, finally, is to be the consciousness of God. Whatever it is, know that your consciousness about that and in that is the thing that will determine the outcome.

The fact is: We are here to live life and live it more abundantly. We are here to do amazing, great things. And yeah; some tough stuff's going to happen! But when it does, don't avoid; don't run away. Because that will rob us of our greatness. That will rob us of life and the fullness and the incredible things that we are here to do and experience.

The fifth practice to prepare for a breakthrough is to **EMBRACE**.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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