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April 1, 2012



ADD TO THE COMMUNITY

Jim Wood, Senior Pastor

This is the day that the Lord has made and it is also Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We will talk about that in a moment. But first, let's look at a passage in First Samuel, chapter eight beginning with the fourth verse. Also, I want to encourage you in the context of our sermon. Context is important, always. Without context it is a pretext. So here we are at the end of the period of the Judges.

The period of the Judges was an interesting time for our ancestors, the Israelites. They seemed to order themselves in community and society together in such a way that they didn't need a lot of rules and regulations. They had God's commands, but, short of this order for their lives, they seemed to do well together. But, from time to time, there would be an outside force that would attack them and so God

would raise up a judge. Usually this person was a military, sometimes a political, but usually a military leader, who would lead Israel in the defense of its people and of its land, including Jerusalem. Now, it is interesting because they didn't seem to come from a particular lineage or family; a variety of folks. For instance, there was a woman judge, Deborah, who was a great, great leader of the Jews. This is the end of the period of the Judges and I want you to listen in particular to the warning that God offers as the people choose to end this season.

1 Samuel 8:4-22

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'

So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will

take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.'

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. The LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice and set a king over them.' Samuel then said to the people of Israel, 'Each of you return home.'

Now in the New testament, The Gospel of John, the twelfth chapter, It is Palm Sunday. It is the first day of that fateful week that changed not only our lives and the church and the world, but the universe. On this day Jesus has returned once again to Jerusalem, and people gather in celebration. Listen for the word of our Lord.

John 12: 12-26

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!' Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!'

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to

testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.'

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We are in the season of questions, so I have a question for you this morning. It is actually a very simple question, although it is going to sound a bit philosophical: Here is the question: How do you know what you know? How do you gain knowledge? What is knowledge? How is it captured? How is it learned? How do you know what you know? It is a question that, in all honesty, I think I've been asking myself since I was five or six years old.

I'll give you that context in a moment. But, as I have grown and aged and begun to study the question, I have become attracted to one particular philosopher, John Locke, and his answer. John Locke actually had a huge influence on Jonathan Edwards, but that is for a lecture at another time. John Locke simply said this; you know by what you experience. It is by experience that you come to know something. Theoretical knowledge really isn't knowledge. Book knowledge, or book learning, really isn't learning until it is experienced. Sort of a way of looking at it is that old thing that your mother said, "Don't put your hand on a hot stove." And, for you

men who were boys at one time, you know that somewhere along the way, no matter how much your mom told you, you had to touch that stove to see if it was hot. Right? And, once you touched it, you learned. You had knowledge that this was something you shouldn't do. We learn by experience; by how we experience things. I have been drawn to that in a very meaningful way. I think that this idea has a huge influence as we shape our lives: that we learn by experience.

I said earlier that I've been asking this question for a long, long time. I think it started when I had a job in the family at age five or six. My first job within the family was, my uncle had a garage in his backyard. My uncle and my dad used to love to work on cars, trucks, all kinds of things. They would spend hours and hours out in the garage working on these cars. The cars always seemed to run fine, but they would put them in the garage and work on them and work on them. I think that it gave them a reason just to be together sometimes.

My job in that garage was simply this: Five, six years old, my job was to hold the light while my uncle and dad worked on the cars. I would have a long, electric drop cord with a bare bulb on it with a little kind of cage around it. My job was to hold the light and, whenever one of them asked for or barked for a tool, to get that tool for him. And so I would do it. I still remember that if I didn't know the tool and I grabbed the wrong one, my uncle would correct me and he would always end with one statement. Every single time, without exception, he would say, "You don't know what you don't know." I would get something wrong again. "You don't know what you don't know." Over, and over and over. I had no idea what he meant by that at all. "You don't know what you don't know."

Well, I jump forward 20 years, 25 years and I'm in a classroom at Princeton with a professor, a philosopher, his name is Diogenes Allen. Diogenes Allen had a huge influence on my life. For the

longest time I thought every philosopher had to be named Diogenes. Dr. Allen was a Greek from Kentucky. He grew up in a blue collar family. His family had a diner and he'd gone to Oxford University. He was a wonderful, genius of a man.

I took some classes with Dr. Allen. There would be six to seven, eight people in the class. We would meet once a week for three hours or so. We would sit around one table, open up a text, and discuss it. We would study and prepare for it. We would get there and we would open up the text and talk about it.

One of the classes I took with Dr. Allen was Plato's *Republic*. One particular day we were on book seven of *Republic*. Now, if you have read *Republic* you know what I am going to say. Book seven has an interesting story in it, about a group of people who are all tied down; latched down in a cave. They are tied down in such a way that they face away from the cave entrance and cannot move their heads. All they can see are the the cave's back wall and shadows of what's going on outside. So they are held down, and when they see a shadow their reality is in front of them. They see it, but they can't touch it, they can't test it, they can't get up and feel it. It is just there for them. They just see it as they are; tied down.

Somehow, one of those men gets free. When he stands up and turns around, he realizes that they are in a cave, And that there is an opening to the cave behind them with the light shining through from outside. All of the things that he had been seeing his entire life were just shadows on the cave wall. And so he comes to realize that this isn't real. The cave isn't the real world. This is just shadows. So he walks out of the cave. Once outside, he can touch and feel, he can see what is the source of all those shadows. He can see what is real.

And then he goes back into the cave and tries to convince those who are still tied down. "What you are looking at, what you are

seeing is not real. Let me tell you the reality. Let me tell you what is true." It is an amazing thing, if you start to think about it. How is it when somebody tied down, when they only have their own experience of reality, how do you give them a new experience? How do you share something new with them? So we are talking about this and Dr. Allen says, "Would anyone like to share?"

The last time I had shared in Dr. Allen's class, after I shared, he had looked at me and said, "Mr. Wood, everything you have said has been totally useless to this entire class." So This time I'm not going to offer. We sit there in silence. That was his style. We sit there in silence and finally he says, "Mr. Wood, would you like to try and not be useless today?" I didn't even know how to answer that. I just didn't want to say anything. I got kind of quiet. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to say, "No sir, I don't want to talk." But I didn't know what that was going to do, or what was going to come.

So I just froze; and I finally just kind of went back to the source of my being and said, "Well Dr. Allen, you know, you don't know what you don't know." He looked at me, he leaned forward, and he said, "Mr. Wood, finally something of great value from you." Then he said, "Lest we risk plagiarism, tell us what time period and what philosopher developed that line of thinking." True story. I looked at him and said, "Well, Willie Albert Wood on Evergreen Avenue in Cayce, South Carolina, in his garage in 1965."

Later, at the end of that semester, I got a grade. I need to find it. I still have it. Written on my grade for that class, Dr. Allen wrote this: "Mr. Wood you deserve a C for this class, but your Uncle Albert deserved an A." And an A is recorded as my grade for that class. You don't know what you don't know. But when I think about my experience in that garage with my Uncle and my Dad, I realize that I learned a lot.

It wasn't the names of the tools and the sizes of the wrenches. I learned what it was like to see two men who just loved being together. I learned what it was like to hear and to tell stories. The stories that they would tell over and over and over and over with such glee and joy. I learned, most importantly, what it was to hold a flashlight. It is not as easy as you think holding the light by the way.

You see, what we normally do when we hold the light is to hold it so that it shines and projects on something that we see from our perspective. But the real key to holding the light for someone else, who is actually doing the work, is to figure out the way they see it and the angle that they have. And so you shine the light in such a way that they can always see. I've thought about that so many times; how many times we have been given the privilege in our lives to shine a light, not just from our perspective, but in such a way that someone else might be able to see something.

I want to say this to you as parents today. Parents of our beautiful children who are here, grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters; for God's sake, tell your children stories. I mean that. Tell them stories. When your little girl says mommy, how did you meet daddy, make it sound like Camelot. Tell them stories about your childhood, about your life, about your parents. Tell them stories about you.

And most importantly, for God's sake, tell them stories of your failures. I mean this from the core of my being. I think that one of the great mistakes we often make with our children is that we tend to want to present life in such a way that it just seems so easy for us. Right? I mean if we want to say, "I always did well in school," The reason we do that is not because we are trying to brag. It is because we are afraid that if we tell our children some of the things that we did when we were getting into trouble at their age, then that is not really an incentive for our children to improve too much. I'll be

honest with you.

And so we create this sort of understanding of our life that is very distant from the reality. And let me simply say this to you. If your children have never heard of your life's failures, of those places where it just didn't go right, where it just couldn't get sorted out, those places where you felt as if you were just totally alone and abandoned; then when that comes in their life, and I promise you it will, no matter how much you want to try and protect them, when it comes in their life they will not know to come to you. And can you imagine what pain that must be.

Tell them stories. Tell them the great things, the Camelot stories. But also be willing to share those places where you were vulnerable, and where you were weak, and where you didn't seem to have it all figured out.

The life of the early church from 165 to 250 A.D. was an amazing period of time. I love a book by Robert Wilken called *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. He studied that period of time in particular and found this explosive growth within the life of the church. Now it is interesting that, one hundred and thirty years after Jesus died, generations after the eyewitnesses of Jesus, in a time when Christians are persecuted, when we are under assault and attack, something happens that causes the church to explode. What is it?

There was a gift of the Holy Spirit in that period of time that called our people to be obedient to the King of Kings. To submit to Him, to realize that the only way that they are going to make it in their life, is to have an undivided loyalty to Christ and Christ alone. So, in obedience to Christ, they began to live in a way that brought transformation in their community and in the world. We have talked about this a number of times. In a time when young girls when they were just born, were very often abandoned, left on the roads, the

Christians would come and pick them up and raise them as their own.

The justice and the love and the care and the compassion that Christians had for each other began to be something that attracted people; that drew people who wanted to understand who we were. And very clearly we talked about having a different kingdom; a unified way of living, not having divided loyalties, but living totally as Christ called us. And the thing that was incredible about it, is that it actually made us better citizens in many ways.

We would not worship the emperor, but we were willing to be good citizens because we knew that that is what it was to be an honorable person. We knew that one cannot make peace with strangers. And so we began to live in such a way that we were in relationship with others but still held to what we knew and what we believed. The church became this amazing place of healing and miracles and the presence of God and overwhelming growth, simply because we had a King that we placed above everything else.

And so when we get to Samuel, we realize this is our problem. We want to have a lord and savior, sort of, but we really want to have a savior. I want Jesus; I want God to be the god with whom I gather on Sunday morning. I want this savior. But then I'll let somebody else be my lord. I want a king like the other nations. I want to be able to replace Jesus, or I want to replace God as King, but not as God. But our divided loyalty, our living in two different realities, is our destruction.

When Jesus has his triumphal entry and they call him the King of Kings, the King of Israel and of all things, it is interesting that, in the Gospel of John, the first people that want to come to him are Gentiles. They are Greeks. They are not interested in Judaism. They are interested in the way Christians worship. They are interested in this

person whom we call the King of Kings, and so they come.

They come to a man named Philip, one of the disciples. Philip is a Greek name. He is from Bethsaida, an area where a lot of Greeks live; perhaps that is why they go to him. They say, "Sir, we would see Jesus." And Jesus comes and speaks to them. But, rather than speaking about the King in the way they would understand it or the way they would think, Jesus says that whoever loves their life must lose it; that whoever serves Jesus must follow him.

Basically what Jesus is saying is that if you want to know him, you have to experience him. We come to know Christ; we come to know Jesus by spending time with him. And, by realizing that the world that we see outside of ourselves will always be a reflection of what we see within. So we start to realize that if we trust and we believe that he is our king, if we are obedient to him, if we submit to him, then all the possibilities of the world start to open. That has been my experience in my life.

It is those places where I have been obedient when I didn't want to be, that Christ speaks so clearly. Here is what I mean by that. I've shared with you before that early in my Christian life (I became a Christian in my mid-twenties.) I was already in the business world and was doing pretty well in it. I became a Christian and joined the church and they got us working with the youth, right away. I was working with the youth and having a ball. I was loving Sundays. It was like the favorite day of the week. I looked forward to it; I was on fire for Jesus. It was just so exciting for my life.

Everything was changing and rock and rolling in my spiritual life, but not in my business life. So one day a group of kids in our youth group coincidentally, providentially, ran into a group of managers that I managed in our restaurants at a mall. Somehow, my name came up, and those two groups of people argued for 30 minutes that

there is no way it could be the same Jim Wood. True story. No way could it be the same Jim Wood. All the kids in the youth group said, "He is so wonderful. he loves Jesus." The managers said, "No, no, no; that is not the guy we were in the meeting with yesterday. I guarantee you."

And it devastated me because I was forced to face the reality. But I was so excited about having to say that I really didn't want a king, a lord other than Jesus, that I left that job just weeks later. I went to seminary not because I wanted to be a pastor, but because I knew that I didn't know what I didn't know.

And it wasn't seminary, it wasn't the study and reflection, as meaningful as that was for me, that excited me. It was being with people in churches that I served, volunteers, interns, people who prayed, who opened up the Word and didn't try to figure out all of the stuff that was just beaten into our heads in seminary; but, simply, people who wanted to know how it was to live in the Word; people who loved me and forgave me.

My first Palm Sunday as a pastor was in a little country church in New Jersey, and I was so out of it. I went and found a donkey. I was a purist, so I found a donkey that was actually less than a year old because that is what the story says. Let me tell you the truth; a donkey less than a year old cannot be broken; even if a donkey can be broken, you aren't going to do anything with one less than a year old. I would practice with that donkey in the house. I would bring him over to the house. I would walk him into the house.

And, on Palm Sunday I rolled down the aisle cloth that we used for all the brides in this old Colonial church from 1810 and I brought that donkey in. Kids doing the hosannas and all and that donkey is just kind of walking and all of sudden the donkey decided it wasn't going any further. It backed up and it sat down on a person in a pew, one

of our elders. I put my head down. I didn't realize my microphone was on and I said, "It takes one to know one." That was a big mistake too.

I think about the disaster that donkey could have been. I was saved from that disaster only by the grace of God and by the forgiveness of a congregation that loved me in spite of myself. I realize that this is how I have experienced the Kingdom of God; by being with people who know what it is to be broken, who know what it is to be in hard places.

I have talked to you about this before. You know that I have struggled with depression for a lot of my life. If you haven't, then you don't know what you don't know. If everything has gone well for you in your life, you don't know what you don't know. I look at the world and I think that we as Christians are so judgmental. I don't believe that we intend to be judgmental. I simply believe that we are being judgmental, or acting as if we are, because we don't know what we don't know.

We only know our own experience, What God says, however, is for us to come and experience his Kingdom from his perspective; the perspective of The One who looks upon all of us and who loves, welcomes, redeems and forgives all of us. And so I look at my life and those places where I have been forgiven, those places where I have been allowed to be who I am, even in the mistakes of my life, and I see that God has still worked something of goodness in it.

We have a beautiful piece of art here this morning. It is part of our exhibit. It will be going over right after this to the art showing. I encourage you to go. It is painted by a good friend of mine, Pat Hartline, a member of our congregation. I've traveled with Pat to Nicaragua; I've been with her in a variety of different settings. She is a dear, dear friend. This painting has taken her 38 years to paint.

Come up and look at it later. It has taken her 38 years to paint. She calls it *A Shining Hill*. It is based on Matthew 5:14, You are the light of the world, a city built on a hill cannot be hidden.

She began painting this 38 years ago when she was an art student at a leading art school in Philadelphia. She said it didn't mean much . then; art school project, throw some paint on the canvas, make something out of it. Would it be great? Would it grow to have meaning? Or would it be just be another big nothing? The quandary of an artist. She says that she painted her life that way too. Sure, throw some colors on the canvas, make something out of it. Sometimes the colors of life you choose don't work. Sometimes the brush strokes aren't defining. Sometimes, you are just lost. Sometimes you can't tell anybody why.

She tells me that she has carried this volatile painting with her for thirty eight years; dusting it off from time to time, thinking she should finish it, and then putting it back in the attic to collect more dust, until Kristine Rand said, "I need something from you," and Pat finally decided that it was time to complete it. She says, "Like life, the sea is volatile. Sometimes it is all consuming. Sometimes it appears molten. Sometimes it is deceptively calm and beautiful, but it is never firm." Pat will tell you that the painting is still not done. She wants to paint more blue on the shining hill. I sense that is the source of something great that Pat is doing.

"Personally," she says, "I'm much more found now. A lot of that is because of this great community and lessons, mission trips, Living Waters,, Bible study, general friendships I've found at First Pres. I have to thank my sister Carol for that. She is the one who said, 'I know you have been searching. Come. You will really like this.'"

The thing that is so amazing to me is that this is my life. It is not finished. It is a series of stops and starts; a series of times when I just

put stuff in the attic. The dust collects, but from time to time someone says, "Now it is time for you to do this." When Pat took the picture to be framed just a few weeks ago, the woman who was helping her frame it said, "This is so beautiful. It is so beautiful. It is so beautiful." And Pat began to tell her about the King of Kings, about the city on the hill and what it might mean for her life.

You don't know what you don't know. If no one has told you, if you have never experienced it, you don't know. I wonder how many in this world don't know that they don't know that there is a God who offers forgiveness and grace. And He says, "If you will come and follow me, not only will I be your Savior but I will be your King and I will lead you in the ways of truth and justice and righteousness. And, you will be my light."

I believe that the world is filled with too many people sitting in a cave strapped in, sitting, staring straight ahead at just shadows. I believe that because that is where I've spent a lot of my life. I believe that the only way that they are going to be set free is for us to enter into the darkness and to bring the light, not from our perspective, but in such a way that they might be able to see what is real. Let's be those people. Let's be the body of Christ, the light of the world.

Let's pray. Father, I thank you and praise you for this day. I thank you for your love and grace. I thank you Lord that you forgive me day in and day out.

I thank you Lord, that you've let us know that our lives are not complete, but that you still have work to do. And yet Lord, I'm grateful for the picture that you have painted at this point and I can only imagine what it will be when there is more blue in the city on the hill. Thank you. In your powerful name we pray.

Amen.