

## Welcome

Most of my dating life, I was the dumpee. But I remember one relationship where I had to be the dumper. One of the best parts of dating is the puppy love - where you and person you're dating are perfect in each others' eyes. They can do no wrong, you're walking on clouds and the whole world seems a little brighter.

Then something happens to break the spell. In this particular relationship, it was the moment she said, "I want to play you my favorite song." I was *thrilled* by this moment. I love music and I love sharing music as a way to get to know people better. So we settled in for a romantic moment of really getting to know one another better. She pulled out a CD (because this was back in the dark ages), slid it into the car's CD player...

...and started blasting Nickelback.

I thought it was a joke until I saw the pure, unbridled joy on her face. This really *was* her favorite song.

I didn't break up with her right then, but that was the moment I knew it wasn't going to work out.

I know that sounds shallow, but if you've dated, you've been there - that moment when the glorious façade of puppy love cracks and the ugly face of reality (which in this case looked a lot like Chad Kroger) gazes out at you.

What's happening in these moments?

Philosophers tell us that when we're first falling in love, it's always a selfish movement. We're projecting onto the other person who we want them to be (which is always an idealized version of ourselves). That's why they seem perfect. We assume they have the same values and beliefs we do, the same taste in music.

Puppy love is really self-love. Which is why it feels so good.

It's why puppy love has to come to an end. Because sooner or later, we can't ignore all the little ways the other person *isn't* like us. We can't ignore how much they are their own person.

And it's also why we call puppy love 'puppy love'. It's shallow. It's immature. It's not as good as the real thing.

Friends, today I want to talk about religious puppy love. Because our relationship with God evolves in the same way as our relationships with one another. We begin infatuated by God, sure that God is on our side, that God agrees with us. We might call it "puppy faith". It's not bad, but it *is* shallow. It can't last. And it *shouldn't* last. Just like we want to move from puppy love to true love, from being loved for

who we're not to being loved for who we are, we want to move from a shallow faith to a deep, wide, world-changing faith.

But to do that, we have to let God be God. That's hard. It's scary. But ultimately, it's good, hope-filled and life-giving.

### **Message**

Today is the last Sunday of Lent. Our series this year has been called *The Devil in the Details*. We've been exploring what happens when we slow down and look more closely at our lives, seek out the sins that blur together when we rush through life. This next week is Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, which remembers how Jesus entered into Jerusalem.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Mark 11. This is the moment Jesus has been warning his disciples about for weeks. If they've been listening, they should know that, now that he's arrived in the capitol, he's going to be crucified. But of course they weren't listening. And if even *they* didn't get it, you can hardly blame the crowds. There are two huge groups of people that converge here: there's a big hoard of pilgrims who've come down from Galilee with Jesus - the Passover festival was the biggest celebration of the year (sort of like going to New Orleans for Mardi Gras). The other group was people from Jerusalem itself.

By this point in Jesus' ministry, he had gained a pretty substantial reputation - the rabbi from Galilee who could preach like no other, who did miraculous healings, who wasn't afraid of the religious establishment. So when word spread that he was about to come into Jerusalem, it was sort of like a huge rock star was rolling into town. His entourage shows up, but so do hundreds of people from the city, lining the streets to get a look at this guy.

But the really incredible thing about Palm Sunday isn't the rock-star entrance. It's that five days later, on Good Friday, this same crowd of people is calling for Jesus' death. Five days. Keep that in mind as we read together. Try to feel the excitement of the crowd, the anticipation. And try to imagine that it completely flips only a few days later:

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. "Go into that village over there," he told them. "As soon as you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden... Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it.

Many in the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields. Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting,

"Praise God!

Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD!

Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David!  
Praise God in highest heaven!" -- Mark 11:1-3, 7-10

The Psalm the crowd sings as they're welcoming Jesus into the city is a big clue to what's going on. It's a Messianic Psalm - they're welcoming Jesus as their conquering king, who's going to free God's people from Roman oppression. The true heir of David's throne, who will reestablish Israel as the center of the universe.

That's not what Jesus is here to do. He's said that multiple times, but his followers have chosen not to hear him. They and the people of Jerusalem are caught up in a puppy faith. They look at Jesus and see what they want to see. They look at Jesus and see their hopes, their dreams, their agendas. And even when Jesus was telling them what he was really about, what the actual plan was, they couldn't hear him. They say love is blind - so is faith, if we're not careful.

Puppy faith is inevitable. And we've all been there - we come to faith for any number of reasons. Maybe we were told God wants us to be healthy and wealthy. Maybe we were promised that if we follow all the rules and do what we're told, life will work out the way we wanted it.

Maybe you prayed for your parents to get back together and it didn't happen. Or you made sure you were in church every week but still didn't get that job. Or maybe you did all the right life things in the right order and your marriage still blew up.

Or maybe the initial glow just sort of wears off and you're surprised to find a life of faith isn't all puppy dogs and rainbows all the time. A lot of the problems that were there before you believed are still hanging around.

There's a kind of selfishness in puppy faith the same as in puppy love. We are enraptured with God because we're excited at how God makes our lives better. But there's a sense in which we're still at the center of this faith-journey. It's still essentially about me: my goals, my dreams, my aspirations.

This is where the people of Jerusalem were when they welcomed Jesus into their city, singing their Messianic songs. They saw what they wanted to see, which was a Jesus who fit their agenda. A Jesus who came to give them what they wanted.

But Jesus doesn't give us what we want. He gives us what we *need*, which is conversion. Transformation. Not a tweaked life, but a whole new life.

Jesus doesn't come to make our stories better. Jesus comes to wrap us up in a whole new story - the story of God. And that doesn't look like we want it to.

The people of Jerusalem figured this out over the next week, as Jesus refused to confront the Romans, refused to raise an army, provoked the religious establishment and criticized the Temple.

You could watch them falling out of love with him day by day. And when they realized that Jesus didn't come to make their lives better, that he came not to kick out Rome but to let Rome crucify him - and that he was inviting God's people to pick up their own crosses and follow him, they turned on him. Their puppy faith gave way to anger and they cried, "Crucify him!"

Friends, I've seen plenty of people follow the same path. They love the idea of Jesus because their idea of Jesus is really an idealized version of their own lives. And when the real Jesus begins to demand something of them, they turn away. They decide a shallow faith is easier - or maybe no faith at all.

But puppy faith, like puppy love, isn't the end goal. It may be where we all inevitably begin, but you know the person who bounces from shallow relationship to shallow relationship (maybe you are that person). There's a lot of fun in the puppy love stage, but it's not *real love*. It's not being known and valued for who you truly are. It's not being free to give yourself wholly to someone else, free from worry about judgement.

Even moreso with puppy faith. Until we follow Jesus to the cross, until we say, "Not my will but yours," we cannot be transformed. Until we put down our selfish insistence that I am the hero of the story, that my concerns are most paramount, we cannot be transformed into the giving fountains of abundant life God created us to be.

We can only enter into the deeper faith, the faith in which we know God even more truly, when we follow Jesus to the Cross. When we let go of our ideas about who God is, our expectations about religion, and enter into God's story.

I can't help but think about my own call to ministry in this regard. It probably won't surprise you to know I wanted to be a physicist growing up. I love science-fiction and was seriously preparing for a career in theoretical physics to study time travel (I know that sounds like a joke - my mom thought so too until we did a campus visit and a science professor assured me that was a valid course of study).

So when I sensed God calling me to ministry, I was not excited. Pastors talk about 'surrendering' to a call into ministry and for me, that was pretty literal. I knew for a full year that God was calling me to become a pastor and I resisted. I didn't want to work in a church. I didn't want to preach. I wanted to be Marty McFly (okay I *really* wanted to be Doc Brown). And for a full year, in my prayer, in my scripture reading, I had to confront the simple fact that I knew what God was calling me to do, but I was refusing.

A year of God's gentle, insistent nudging to give my life to his plan, not mine. That was more than 20 years ago, and I can honestly say I can't imagine being a theoretical physicist. I'm grateful that I chose to submit to God's will for my life (something that has happened over and over again as I've moved through my career). I wouldn't be here at Catalyst if I had my way - which just goes to show that my way isn't a very good idea.

Most of you are not called into vocational ministry, but we are all called. Where do you sense a tension between what God is calling you to do and what you want? Where do you sense God's true call challenging you, inviting you to be uncomfortable, insisting you surrender?

I know how scary that can seem. But I also know that following God is better. It's better to walk with Jesus to the cross than to chant for his crucifixion. Better to have a deep faith that transforms than a shallow puppy faith that leaves us as we are.

Throughout this season of Lent, we've been slowing down so that God can challenge us. We've been allowing God's truth to pierce our self-deception, praying our faith deepens.

So today, on this Palm Sunday, let us not be like the crowds who waved palm branches as they welcomed who they *wanted* God to be. That sort of faith is the faith that crucifies when God refuses to meet our expectations.

Rather, let us commit to be faithful to this God no matter where he leads us. Let him challenge us and call us and surprise us. Let us say Yes, no matter what comes, even when that Yes leads us to a cross!

#### **Communion + Examen**

At this table, we find who Jesus really is: the God who dies for us and invites us to join him.

1. Where in the last six weeks have I sensed God calling to me?
2. How in the last six weeks have I ignored God's call?
3. Where do I need to say "No" to myself so I can say "Yes" to God?
4. What is God calling me to next?

#### **Assignment + Blessing**

As we look toward Good Friday, reflect on your Lenten journey. What has gotten in the way of your calling? What needs to go? What needs to be moved? What needs to be added?