

The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat. It's a common feeling this time of year as March Madness keeps churning out the expected and wildly unexpected moments. It causes the strangest range of emotions, particularly if you're one of those people—like me, who fill out a bracket with intentionality and focus, only to have that bracket basically burst into flames within days of the tournament starting. There are those teams that you are *so convinced* are going to be the guys. The ones who have been awesome all season and just are expected to keep it up, the ones that seem to have that spark of magic, coming alive at the right time of year to earn that coveted title of *Cinderella*, the ones that no matter what logic and stats might dictate need to be ignored or chosen against you just can't because they're *your guys*, and when it goes right, it feels *euphoric*, but when it doesn't, man, the joy of basketball can turn into just one big angst fest.

You watched this play out all last weekend. Illinois' Fighting Illini, top dogs all season, who just kept pumping out wins, and everyone thought man, they've got something special here, only to run into the brick wall that is Loyola Chicago and the godly power of Sister Jean. Suddenly, everyone's like, the Big 10 is *nothing* this year, they really weren't that good, why did we choose them anyway, we should have known they would be bad. The out of nowhere Cinderella capacities of Oral Roberts University who

basically no one thought had the oomph, the basketball chops to take down a powerhouse like Ohio State, but once they did, everyone's a believer. *Of course*, you should have chosen Oral Roberts, how could you not?! And then there are people like me, foolishly holding out hope that my Wolverines can make a run at this thing, and when they win I'm adamant about how much I believed in them, but when the inevitable loss comes, and I know it will...I will say I knew it all along, they weren't quite ready to go that far in the big dance. It's stunning our human capacity to change our impressions and opinions on a whim. As quickly as the wind blows we change our tune in order to go along with the prevailing theme of the day, even if it isn't even accurately reflective of how we really feel. Even if it isn't how we know we should feel. We shift with popular opinion in order to keep things steady, to keep things safe, even if our hearts are tugging us in the other direction.

The time has finally arrived. Jesus has been slowly but surely making his way towards Jerusalem and the days have finally come when there is no other choice but to go, even if still he isn't sure this is what he wants to do, it's what he knows he *has* to do. For as much as he's been trying to prepare the disciples' hearts and minds for what is to come, he's been having to do the same for himself, and you have to imagine that on some level having this groundswell of crowds with him has helped. I mean there had to have felt

like some level of assurance that as his footsteps turned towards the city and the crowds continued to follow along that he would have some sort of support, that he wouldn't be entirely alone for what was to come. He had to feel some sense of hope that the work, the action he had been and was going to do on behalf of the kingdom of God was going to come to fruition because the crowds were still with him. He had to have made an impact. They had to have gotten it, some small part of it along the way. This couldn't all just be for nothing...

So he sends the disciples ahead of him, and as Zechariah foretold it, Israel's king enters into Jerusalem not on the back of a warhorse or on the clattering wheels of a chariot, but on the humble back of a donkey. And it seems like the crowds are still there, still with him, still on board for what they are seeing. They see this moment as the moment of their Messiah arriving. They strew their palm branches and cloaks before him, an acknowledgement of his kingly stature and they shout Hosanna, a plea for Jesus to save them now, and you can feel their hope, their trust. This is what they've been waiting for. Salvation. Hope. Restoration. The return of the Davidic throne. The renewed promise that God was active amongst them.

I mean there's just this surging feeling amongst the crowds that something amazing is happening before their very eyes. They've seen the

healings, they've heard the teachings, they've seen the miracles, they've heard the promises and now they're ready and raring for things to kick into high gear, right here in the center of Jerusalem, in the middle of their holiest time. The Messiah has arrived. The king has come. And you can feel that bracket like anticipatory feeling—like this is the year, this is what we knew was going to happen, this is what we've been longing for. This was the right team to bet on, to place our hopes upon. Jesus is going to end the madness of this Roman rule, and it's going to be a whole new world.

And you have to wonder...did Jesus know? Did Jesus know as he was paraded through the streets that these very same people were mere days away from turning on him, from tearing up their brackets and going home, because things didn't go their way? Did he know as they laid their palm branches before him that what he was going to give them wasn't going to be what they were anticipating and so the tables would quickly turn? Did he know that those shouts of hosanna would shift to demands of crucify him when these people who had been with him for so long realized that he wasn't there for some military uprising, that he wasn't going to throw Rome out of the city, declare martial law, and put himself on an actual throne, but that he was there for the uprising of his actual body, to throw sin out of the world, declare the reign of God in love and forgiveness, and put himself

upon a cross? Did he know, did he anticipate how quickly they would forget all he had taught them, simply because things weren't turning out the way that they wanted? Did he know that they would declare that they knew all along this was the wrong horse to back because how could anything this good be real? Did he know that they would fully support his shift from Cinderella story to common criminal so quickly?

We want to be so critical of the crowds here. We want to point at them and ask how did you go so wrong, so fast?! We wonder how they could so blatantly forget the signs of the kingdom, the new kind of kingdom that Jesus had laid before them for the last three years. We want to scream at them **JESUS TOLD YOU THIS WAS HOW IT WAS GOING TO BE!!!** We want to kind of just shake them and be like, he has been clear from the beginning that this was going to be a kingdom unlike any other, salvation unlike anything they had ever anticipated, love that was beyond fathoming, and just shake our heads like how could you be so blind? Except here we sit. Here we sit in not always willing recognition that we do the exact same thing. All the time. The world around us screams this is how Jesus told you it was going to be, this is who Jesus called you to be, this is the kingdom you signed up for, and yet...we want nothing to do with it once it pushes against our own hard and fast expectations, comfort zones, and concerns.

We say, hosanna in the highest, save us, Jesus. Jesus says, love your neighbor. Love your neighbor that is different from you. Love your neighbor who flies different political flags than you. Love your neighbor who is on the other side of the border, who loves differently than you, who looks different than you. Love your neighbor who believes differently than you. Love your neighbor you don't even know. Love your neighbor the world has told you to hate and we say...crucify him.

We say, hosanna in the highest, save us, Jesus. Jesus says, forgive as I am about to forgive you. Let go of grudges and useless, petty squabbles. Free yourself from the chains of angst that bind your heart with animosity. Strive for reconciliation and hope. Push against the boundaries of your heart and ask them why they won't let you open up and forgive. Realize and feel deep within you the forgiveness I am extending to you and then have the audacity to admit that others need it too and we say...crucify him.

We say, hosanna in the highest, save us, Jesus. Jesus says he's come to give life and life abundant for all of God's children. Jesus talks about equity and justice and mercy and a safe kingdom of God where all of God's children know they are beloved and can thrive. Jesus talks about turning the world upside down, pulling the powerful down and lifting up the lowly, protecting those that are vulnerable, and bringing the kingdom of heaven to

earth and we say...our thoughts and prayers are with those who are hurting, but don't ask us to change...we say, crucify him.

We say, hosanna in the highest, save us, Jesus. Jesus says the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and that God's children have been called to be servants to all. He talks about washing the feet of others and pouring oneself out for the sake of our neighbor. He talks about a life lived not in service to self, but in service to those around us, those in need. He talks about giving wholly from our souls and caring for those around us. He talks about self-sacrificial living and loving and we say...crucify him.

We say, hosanna in the highest, save us, Jesus. And Jesus shows us the cross and we realize that salvation doesn't come how we expect it to and the kingdom of God isn't molded to our earthly expectations. We find out that the perfect bracket of our lives that we think is ideal is nothing compared to what God has in store and in a split second we're ready to give up and throw the thing out. We're so critical of the crowds until we realize we are them, and we aren't always ready for Jesus. We aren't always ready for who the kingdom calls us to be. So here we stand, palm branches at the ready and it begs the question, will we let them wave and usher in the kingdom of God or will we trample them under the feet of human desire because we're not ready for who Jesus has come to be? **AMEN!!!**