

“From Palms to Passion”

Palm Sunday/B, April 5, 2009

Mark 11: 1-11, Psalm 11: 1-2, 19-29

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This morning we will focus on the “Palm” part of the story. The passion part is what you will hear when you attend the Maundy Thursday or Good Friday service. The Palm Sunday story begins with Jesus’ triumphal entry into the city, riding on a colt with crowds waving palms and shouting loud “Hosannas.” Typically we begin the 10:30 worship by singing a hymn like *All Glory Laud and Honor*, as we did (will) this morning, while the children parade through the church on their way to Church School. At the 8:30 service there is far less drama; no children, no parade, no palm waving. This year there are no children. They are gathering (will gather) in their classrooms this morning to hear the story of Jesus’ final days and to say their own “goodbye” to the place where their faith has been so richly nurtured.

This morning you may hear references to Christ’s passion in the hymns or the prayers. However, if you want to know how the story ends, I encourage you to read the rest of Mark’s gospel. There you will find out what happened to Jesus after the parade. It is difficult to fully appreciate the power of the resurrection if you do not follow Jesus all the way to the end. I encourage you to worship on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. On either day the pathos and power of the story will deeply move you. I have come to experience Holy Week as the most moving and meaningful time in the Christian year.

I admit that I have not always felt this way about Holy Week. As a child I don’t remember ever attending a Good Friday service. I had no idea what Maundy Thursday was until I went to college. My parents were not church going folks. I understand now as a parent how one would be tempted to shield one’s children from Good Friday. As adults, we can succumb to the same temptation. It is not easy to hear the passion part of the story. It is difficult to enter fully into the drama, in prayer, song, and meditation. We would rather not contemplate our place in the story or be held accountable for the ways in which we might continue to crucify our Lord even today. However, even children know that death is a natural part of life and it was no less so for Jesus. When we embrace his struggle we allow Jesus to touch our lives more deeply and richly.

Our images and stereotypes of Jesus are formed by what we learn as a child. I grew up with a “Jesus loves the little children” image that was reinforced by the hymns we sang, the stories we heard and the paintings of Jesus that hung on the walls of my church. I remember the gathering space on the second floor of the First Calvary Baptist church that I attended as a child. There I saw paintings of a fair skinned Jesus, holding either a lamb or a small child in his arms. This was a very tranquil Jesus, someone I would very much like to meet. There was nothing controversial about him. That Jesus would have been smiling as he joyfully greeted the palm waving crowd, reaching out to touch the children. He would make me want to cheer and pledge my loyalty to him.

In the story this morning we find the Palm Sunday Jesus; the one who would never let you know that a tragedy awaits him. Jesus arrives in the city, instructs his disciples to fetch him a donkey, then rides triumphantly through the screaming throngs of supporters. No one would suspect he was only days away from his own execution. It is astonishing how quickly his life will change. His followers, those who love him, are not prepared to handle what is to come next even though Jesus has been preparing them for such a day.

Jesus expects his disciples to do more than cheer and wave palm branches. He invites us to go further, to follow him to the dark places, to experience the fullness of discipleship. Life is what happens between Sundays. How easy it would be if all we heard was the Palm Sunday and Easter stories. That is why so many churches this morning read not only the palm but also the passion part of the story. Jesus came to redeem our weekday lives. He tells his disciples to be alert because things are not always what they seem. Even when people appear to support you, they are liable to change their minds in an instant. He has modeled for them a new way of being community that has made as many people hate him as want to follow him. He has messed with the status quo and he knows that what he has done and what he calls people to do will eventually lead to his death. He is prepared to accept his death, not because it will make the religious or political authorities happy, not because it will silence him, but because he understands this to be God's will.

This is more than a sweet story about parades, acclamations and palm waving. The preacher Joel Shuman says, "when Jesus rode into Jerusalem that afternoon on the back of a colt, he was, quite literally, looking for trouble. At a time when Jerusalem was full of Jewish pilgrims and Roman soldiers, when political tensions and the potential for a popular uprising were both swollen by circumstance, Jesus enacted messianic prophecy, proclaiming to anyone who cared to hear that God's messiah was entering the city. The people who threw down their cloaks and the branches from nearby trees understood and became part of the unfolding drama, chanting the Psalm (118) that says 'Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! / Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.'"¹

We know the rest of the story. We know that Jesus spent that week in the temple, teaching and agitating. We know what is to come. This morning's story ends with Jesus going to the temple to take a last look around. It is empty. There is no one there. This is the calm before the storm. Then he moves on to be with his friends. By the end of the week his fate will be sealed, his followers will desert him, not understanding what he has been teaching and preaching all this time. By the end of the week, he will submit courageously to the death that has already been determined for him.

It is no accident that Jesus rides in on a donkey and not a horse. The donkey is humble and unpretentious. It is the mode of transportation for one who is lowly. Donna Schaper says, "Donkeys traverse rough terrain; donkeys and difficulty go together. Jesus has chosen the servant's role and a servant's means of transportation." She says, "the great ceremony of the donkey and the palms and the arrival all signal that an important

¹ Joel Shuman, "Spoilin' for a Fight," sermon for Palm Sunday, 2009.

decision has been made. The servant has set himself on the road to kingship by way of the difficult ground transportation of servanthood. The boy from Bethlehem is on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus is not going to settle for being human; divinity is his destination.”

Jesus keeps teaching us that in order to be great and godlike, we must become small and humble. He will not be swayed by the way the people laying their cloaks down, waving their palms and boldly proclaiming their praise for him. He understands how fleeting this praise will be. He also understands the spiritual connection of life and death in ways his disciples can not yet fully comprehend; to have a great life, we must be prepared for death. Jesus is ready to accept his death. The disciples will eventually be ready as well.

It is tempting to rush headlong to the resurrection. Jesus does not let us take the easy way out. He challenges us to wait a minute, to take time to consider the days leading to his arrest and crucifixion. He has already taught us that his death was no accident, but rather something provoked by his faithful embodiment of the Gospel. Jesus invites us to go joyfully, longingly, hopefully with him to dark Gethsemane, to shadow-laden Calvary and to the stone absent tomb. We know what awaits us yet we have nothing to fear. For it is in courageously facing the darkness that we are made strong. Amen