

## “Palm Waving”

Mark 11: 1 – 11

Makemie Presbyterian Church

April 5, 2009 Palm Sunday

11When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you & immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it & bring it. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it & will send it back here immediately.’” <sup>4</sup>They went away & found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; & they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus & threw their cloaks on it; & he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, & others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead & those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

<sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

<sup>11</sup>Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

This ends our reading.

In the Old Walled City of Jerusalem, roughly two millennia ago, this is the day when the Son of David, Jesus of Nazareth, burdened with the plot against him & the solemn business that lay before him, rode into town on the back of a beast of burden. In contrast when Kaiser Wilhelm entered the city of Jerusalem in 1898 he did it in grand style. He ordered the Jaffa Gate widened in order to fit his ornate carriage through the opening. But the people of Jerusalem, bored with the sight of royalty coming & going past its gates through the centuries, yawned & said of the Kaiser, "A better man than he came through this city's gate riding on a donkey."

It's a strange figure that Jesus cuts, with his legs bowed around this beast, trying to stay upright, a cloak stretched across its back. Almost as if he was a circus performer riding the back of an elephant astraddle the neck, holding on for dear life. It's now a balancing act for him.

In my confirmation Bible there are paintings rendered of different Bible passages; Rebecca at the well, Moses returning down the mountain with the tablets, Jesus riding into the city. All are illustrated with soft primary colors & pastel shadings. Jesus is wearing an off-white robe with a hood on it, his bare feet adding to the warmth & humanness of the man, along with his gentle dark eyes.

He is surrounded by friendly children & kindly townsfolk of the city who lean out their windows & run along the street beside the animals wishing Jesus well & waving palm branches, the adults throwing their coats in the road, to make a trail & all the while shouting, "Hosanna, Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It's how we begin our holiest week.

I keep coming back to that strange word, "Hosanna." You've got to admit that it is not a term that comes up in everyday conversation. If you are like me, the last time you uttered "Hosanna" was, well... a year ago in March, last Palm Sunday. It is a peculiar word--one that is difficult to define. Scholars' best guess is that "Hosanna" is a contraction of two Hebrew terms: yaw-shah, meaning to save or deliver, and naw, meaning to beseech or pray. So you might translate the shouts of the crowd as: "We beseech you to deliver us." The people cheered. They tossed branches from the nearby trees to the ground & they called out, "Hosanna." They looked upon this prophet--rumored to be the Messiah--& they cried out to him, "Save us. Save us." I'm thinking that the meaning of Palm Sunday hangs on those two words--on that simple plea. Do we feel compelled to shout "Save us!" to our God as we prepare for Holy Week?

But it's a friendly scene, full of joy & happiness. And it seems the

whole city has turned out to see him, like some celebrity on a float in a parade, like the grand marshal.

On Google maps you may virtually tour the old city of Jerusalem & see the narrow & cobble stoned streets. Streets that rise & dip & turn sharply & are isolated from one another by all the buildings that hug the sides of these streets so closely. With all the blind alleys it doesn't seem like you would be able to hear what's going on from one street to the next. And my hunch is that maybe there was not quite so much energy & enthusiasm as portrayed by the artists of the illustration in my childhood Bible.

What is this parade anyway? Is it a joyful entry, a protest march, a funeral procession? Is Jesus a triumphant hero returning to the city, or a bronco buster riding a bull into the ring? It's hard to tell what's really going on here.

Most of our kids think that this Sunday is a rehearsal for Easter, a practice session for the colorful eggs & jelly beans & chocolate bunnies; Palm Sunday serves as a kind of run through for us, a warm & fuzzy day of happy feelings & welcome banners meant to send us home with smiles & good feelings about what is coming up this week.

But is this a triumphal entry? The echo lasts too short a time, & the hollowness of the praises are but for a moment. The shouts of hosanna will give way to the shouts to crucify. The palm branches that we save today will be burned next Lenten tide, recycled to make the ashes for the foreheads of the faithful; marked with a sooty cross.

Jesus enters the city as the Son of David, a king & yet not so. He arrives a prophet & yet unknown. He comes as the long awaited Messiah, triumphant & yet, not yet.

Mark captures it when, as the parade has passed, arms tired from all the palm waving, the sound of the tin pans beaten with sticks is fading, the Sanitation crews are sweeping up the litter from the street & the people of Jerusalem ask, "Who is this? Who was that?" And the answer, "the Prophet Jesus from the outback of Nazareth, in the north country of Galilee, that's all." To which the people must have said, "All that? ...for that?"

So the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was probably not that triumphal... or memorable for that matter, other than the fact that it looked so much like what Zechariah said it might when the messiah would come.

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (9:9).

It is really what happens next that is memorable. With pieces of greenery flicked on his shoulders, the confetti still in his hair, the glitter still sprinkled on his tunic, Jesus rides his donkey to the temple precincts, dismounts, goes inside & looks around the courtyard. And when he sees the moneychangers in the temple, he is enraged. He upsets their tables, throws over the film kiosks & busts up the trinket shops, saying,

*“Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but you have made it a den of thieves. And the scribes & chief priests heard it & sought how they might destroy him” (11: 17 & 18).*

So Jesus sets into motion a course of events that will be for him irretrievable. Every act measured, every word parsed, every deed considered. All of it will be carefully preserved by the gospel writers in close detail; remembered as if their lives depend on it. When someone dies, you remember the details of the last day or week or month so clearly. All the minutiae become etched into our mind.

*Remember how she was so thirsty that last day?*

*How she seemed so restless as if she knew that her hour had come.*

*Or how she kissed us all good night, as if it were for the last time.*

And we load meaning on the back of events that would otherwise have no particular significance & preserve & protect them as if they were fragments of the Holy Grail.

Maybe that's why the gospel writers remember so closely the details of this last time Jesus came to the city. The events start to careen out of control; until at last he is strung up on a cross, the spikes in his wrists & feet, the thorns press on his brow from the makeshift crown, the flesh of his back torn until raw by the cat-o-nine-tails, the exposure of hours laid out on a crossbeam between two thieves, until he breathes his last.

Someone told me last week, "I'm coming to the Community service on Good Friday, but I don't like how it ends, so I won't be there all the way through." I understand. I understand. All of us like the parade. None of us likes the way it turns out.

And yet, and yet... there is a reason that he goes this way, there is purpose for his dying.

There are, in spite of what you hear, a number of ways of understanding why it is that Jesus goes to the cross & what happens there. Not the physiological aspects of his dying mind you, although even that has been analyzed in great detail; but theologically what's happening. Why is it that God allows this death in such a tortuous way; why does this happen to such a good & Godly man; what does it ultimately accomplish?

One explanation the church has given through the years is a doctrine called substitutionary atonement. In this explanation, Christ took our place on the cross to placate God; to pay for our sins. It is based on the primeval understanding that God requires blood sacrifice for sin. But I have always had some difficulty with that idea & its understanding of a God who must be paid. After all we say every Sunday the prayer Jesus taught, that contains, "forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, questions the compassion of a Christian God who can stomach sacrificing his son. He recounts the story of Abraham & Isaac - Abraham standing over his son with a knife ready to sacrifice at God's command the longed for, only child of his & Sarah's old age. Wiesel says that the main difference between Judaism & Christianity is that on Mount Moriah, the father did not kill his son, while on Golgotha,

he did. And that Wiesel says makes him eternally grateful that God made him a Jew. The idea of blood sacrifice for sin runs deep in Christian thought. It is embedded in Mark & Matthew, appears in Paul's writings, is addressed by John Calvin the Reformation father of Presbyterianism. All that considered, we can't find it in John's gospel. It's not the only way the church has interpreted the meaning of the cross.

There are in life certain things we *want* to do, certain things we *need* to do, certain things we *have* to do & certain things we *choose* to do. In my understanding of the cross & what happens there, the emphasis is on what Jesus chooses to do & also on what he needs to do, what he is born to do, if we can talk about such a thing in such a way at all. Sometimes in life we discover an ultimate meaning for our life, a reason that consumes us, enlightening us so that all the rest of our life, is lived in purpose & service.

What Jesus was born to do that he does on the cross, is to show us the extent of God's love for us, to take on human flesh & enter into the suffering of the world. His purpose in life was not to be a carpenter, not to be a preacher, not to be a miracle worker, nor even a healer alone, but to be the bearer of God's love & compassion for our sake; to meet us at our point of need.

That is why he took upon him the pain, the violence, the hurt, the suffering. To go so far as to drink death from the same cup from which we all ultimately drink – that was his purpose in life. And in so doing, because he bore the very imprint of God upon him, he showed us the extent to which God's love reaches out to us & embraces us.

It is finally *for love* that Jesus sits on that donkey & balances on that colt as Mark puts it. Finally *for love* that he goes to the temple & overturns the tables of the money changers. *For love* that he enters the city & confronts the scribes & Pharisees, tells his parables, predicts the fall of the temple. *For love* that he gathers his disciples for that last supper at the Passover table, *for love* that he goes to the garden where he is arrested, & later tried & ultimately crucified. All for love; for love of God & love of us. To show us that no greater love has any person than this, than to give his life for another.

It took the disciples a long time to understand. They fumbled their way thru the last supper, not realizing why he washed their feet, or why that woman came & anointed his feet with her tears. They didn't understand his speaking of betrayal, or of the words he said about the bread or the cup, not until they saw his body hanging from the cross & his blood poured out,

streaming down his side. They didn't get it until it was almost too late. Until the resurrection came & they saw just how much he had loved them.

That's how God loves us; through one another & through the world & most especially through Jesus. It's why he entered the city that day. It's not all that it seems, nor is he all that we thought. For he comes triumphant, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief & we esteemed him not. He is the Son of David, the long awaited messiah but not as imagined.

To all who would praise him today, to all who would acclaim him a king, he offers an invitation to follow him on a difficult path, stony & winding down the cobbled narrow streets of a city that has known its share of sorrow & knows it still, where at the end of the way lays a cross.

None of us likes the way it ends now. Except for the love that is there. Which is why he came to us at all. Which is why he comes to us still.

“Ride on, sweet Jesus, ride on today. Ride on, ride on in majesty. In lowly pomp ride on to die. Bow thy meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, thy power & reign.” Amen.