

**“Preparers of the Way”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**Palm Sunday**  
**Sunday, April 5, 2009**  
**Scripture: Mark 11:1-11**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Holy Lord, as we hear and think about your word to us today, give us strength to follow our Savior to the cross – not thinking about ourselves and our needs, but focusing upon your reign and its triumph. Amen.*

A little girl came home from worship on Palm Sunday. Her father, who had not attended the worship service that day, asked what she had learned. She told him she learned all about the crowd waving their palm branches and singing a song to Jesus.

Her father, pleased that she had learned so much, asked, “What was the song they were singing to Jesus?”

The little girl paused, then said, “I think it was ‘O Susanna’.”

I think this story resonated with me because on Friday I spent twenty minutes or so with our Preschool children telling them the story of Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday and going (age appropriately, of course) up to Easter. I had asked the teachers to help the children make palm leaves and at the end of our time together, we had a parade up and down the aisles of the sanctuary, waving our palms and saying, much as we did this morning, “Hosanna!” They were having a great time, but to be honest I am not really sure what it was they were saying. It could have been “O Susanna” just as easily as “Hosanna!”

Palm Sunday is the celebration of that momentous day when crowds of people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem and the crowds sang, “O Susanna.” Well, not exactly. They sang, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They welcomed Jesus as their potential liberator from the oppression of Rome. They could not know that he came as their Savior from the ravages of sin and death.

Even more importantly, Palm Sunday helps prepare us for Holy Week, the last week in Jesus’ earthly ministry, culminating in his horrific crucifixion on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the most important eight days on the Christian calendar. Christ is welcomed into Jerusalem with the waving of palm branches and the shouts of, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”. But it wasn’t long after that the crowds began to turn against him. He had his Last Supper with his disciples [which we will commemorate Thursday evening]. The week ends with his body broken on the cross of Calvary and his disciples fleeing in disbelief, only to have their world turned upside down when he began appearing to them in his new resurrected body. What a magnificent drama in these last eight days!

No wonder millions of people over the ages have had their lives transformed by its power – and no wonder that Easter Sunday is a day when Dave will have to be ready with extra chairs and you will expect me to say, “scrooch”! A magnificent message is encapsulated in a very short period of time. It is the message of salvation. John explained it like this in the prologue to his gospel, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”.

What does it all mean, do you think? And more importantly, what does it mean in our lives – yours and mine?

Today is one of the most impressive days of the Christian year. And today, here at First Church, we began a new tradition of walking around the church waving our palms and saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” And yet, to be honest, our Gospel reading for today is not that impressive. It tells of Jesus’ parade into Jerusalem, where he is greeted by joyous crowds, but it also tells of some rather commonplace, mundane actions by his disciples.

Today is the day that we have been waiting for. Jesus at last makes his triumphal

entry into Jerusalem. His ministry began out back, out in the rural areas of Galilee. But throughout the Gospel, he has alluded to the time when he needed “to go up to Jerusalem.” There, he would confront the powers, there his reign, begun out in Galilee, would reach its glorious consummation. There he would enter the holy city of Jerusalem and establish his rule over it and take it back for God’s reign.

And what does Mark say that Jesus did in order to enter the capitol city, in order to parade in triumph and take his crown? Mark says that everything gets going by Jesus’ first sending a couple of his disciples to go get a colt. Securing transportation is a relatively important matter, but only relatively. It could also be seen as a very mundane, non-spectacular, and even trivial matter. Mark expends nearly half of his verses about Palm Sunday in this rather detailed (at least for the gospel of Mark) description of acquiring a colt for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem.

Tom Long whose preaching I have long admired, in a meditation on this passage, says, “Though no one knows what these two disciples were thinking, I’m very confident that they had imagined for themselves a grander and nobler role on this day than being on “donkey detail”. Long says that, though Mark does not explicitly say which two disciples went and got the animal, he suspects that maybe it was James and John. Just a few hours before, these were the two disciples who had said to Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

Some glory they were now experiencing! Jesus is to go head-to-head with the principalities and powers, striding into the capitol city, his disciples at last having a chance to be vindicated before the whole world, and here these two assistants are sent to find the donkey. The disciples were all busy trying to get some glory, asking among themselves, “When we get him elected Messiah, and God’s reign has come, who will get to sit on the board of directors”?

And here are Jesus’ two disciples, sent out to rent a donkey.

This is not an inspiring story of how great it is to be a disciple of Jesus! Mark's Gospel began back in Epiphany, with Jesus calling his disciples to leave home, work, and family and hit the road with him. Jesus did not look much like the Messiah in those early days, and his path did not remind anybody of God's reign. But eventually, with hard work, and some infusion of the Holy Spirit, who knows? Surely this thing will get going, the movement will take off, the crowd will gather, Caesar will at last recognize his superior, and it will be impressive and great!

But...not so much! The great triumphal procession begins with two disciples, sent by Jesus, to wheel and deal with some donkey trader, standing in the mire of some forlorn stable, trying to get Jesus the means to get into Jerusalem.

When the Gospel of John tells this story, it is told differently. There, Jesus comes into town on foot. A donkey comes on the scene, not because of advance work by the disciples, but rather in response to the crowd. In John, the crowd gets caught up in the frenzy of welcoming the new "king" to town, waving palm branches and shouting political slogans. There, Jesus grabs a donkey and sits upon it, as if to say – "I'm not the kind of king you are expecting." Nobody would expect a powerful, messianic king to bounce into town on the back of a donkey.

But in Mark's Gospel, finding the donkey and arranging transportation is something that is delegated to the disciples. As you likely know, throughout his Gospel, Mark has a not-too-positive picture of Jesus' disciples. They are always misunderstanding, befuddled, and not-so-bright.

So – what do you think – is Mark now, here in chapter 11, attempting to paint a more positive picture, here toward the end? But if not for their obedience in attending to mundane details and going to fetch the donkey for Jesus, there wouldn't have been a triumphal Palm Sunday. No "Hosannas!" would have been sung. They went out as they were told, did as they were commanded, and found a donkey at the last minute, and thus the Son of God was welcomed to

Jerusalem.

Mark's Gospel begins with John the Baptist's voice crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." This Sunday, take that as a definition of a faithful disciple, one who prepares the way of the Lord. We disciples – thank goodness – are not expected to be the Messiah. Rather, we are the ones who secure the room, so that Jesus can have an intimate, last meal with his friends. We are the ones who go get the donkey, so that Jesus can enter the capitol city in the manner which eventually reveals who Jesus is and what his mission is about. Such is the reign of God.

There are times when Jesus sends his disciples out to preach, to heal, and to cast out demons from troubled people. But this Sunday, let us remember that most of us disciples are called to more ordinary, mundane tasks. We are the ones who take the chocolate pie when we hear that someone's loved one has died. We are the ones who promise, "I will keep you in my prayers", when we hear that someone is going through a hard time. We are the ones who make sure that the church van has good tires before the youth go off to camp. And, my friends, it is through these seemingly small, countless gestures, that we fulfill the will of God. We are preparing the way of Jesus. We are doing those things which must be done before Jesus can make his entry into the world.

As many differences as there are between Mark's Gospel and the words of the other gospel writers, each of them begins with Jesus' calling of his disciples. And in each of the gospels, it is clear that Jesus called a group of ordinary people to follow him, to work with him, and to work for him. With all of their faults and weakness, Jesus placed upon them great responsibility for the advent of God's reign. And seeing that, my friends, should give us a peculiar hope as Jesus' contemporary "Preparers of the Way". May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to King Duncan for his sermon, "Eight Days until Eternity", William H. Willimon for his sermon, "Preparers of the Way",*

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