

## **March 29, 2015**

### **Procession with Palms: Mark 11:1-11**

1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethpage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?' just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.' " 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 11 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.

### **Isaiah 50:4-9a**

4 The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5 The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. 7 The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9 It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

### **Psalms 31:9-16**

9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. 10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. 11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. 12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. 13 For I hear the whispering of many— terror all around!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. 14 But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God." 15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. 16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### **Mark 15:1-39**

1 As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." 3 Then the chief priests accused him of many things. 4 Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." 5 But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. 6 Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. 7 Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. 8 So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. 9 Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" 13 They shouted back, "Crucify him!" 14 Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

## **Sermon**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,  
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:  
Amen.

We stand on the brink now. Though today officially stands as Palm Sunday, we hear also the hints of Good Friday. Though today shouts ring out, "Hosanna in the highest!," all too soon those cries become, "Crucify him!" Our expectant joy turns to irreverent ferocity in just a few days. And whose voices are these that we hear, shifting from joy to violence without so much as a hitch? Not just someone else's, but surely ours as well.

During Jesus' time, a number of Jewish factions held sway in Israel. Chief priests, scribes, Pharisees,

and Sadducees all represented various forms of Judaism. Though each held very different beliefs and political practices, each of these sects depended in some way upon the political power of Rome. Some relationships were better than others, but each saw Rome's rule as a necessary evil until the Messiah's return, and so they cooperated.

The Zealots offered severe opposition to each of these parties, for one simple reason: Zealots sought rebellion against Rome. Zealots believed that no one other than a descendent of David should rule in Jerusalem. Anything else, in their eyes, was heresy, was false, was unholy. The Zealots wanted war to overthrow Rome, to rid themselves of Herod's legacy, to escape Pilate's interference. And because of all

this, Zealots had the allegiance of many commoners in Israel. The normal people, without much wealth or political influence, saw the Zealots as the only viable way to God's blessing on Israel.

In the midst of this political chili, here comes this Jesus guy, riding on a colt. What we may not remember is that Zachariah prophesied that the Messiah would enter into Jerusalem just this way, riding upon the colt or foal of a donkey. Jesus intentionally embraces the Messianic role at this point. Before this, he's seemed reluctant at times, even shushing those who declare him as the Son of God. But now? Now he comes to Jerusalem not as a homeless healer, not as a wandering teacher, but as a long-lost monarch, returning to reign and rule. And

the Zealots eat it up, crying “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

But of course, Jesus isn't really the kind of revolutionary they seek, though he surely turns the world upside down. This time in Jerusalem is tense. At about the same time Jesus rides in to Jerusalem through a southern gate, Herod and Pilate parade in, likely with a legion, through another gate as they want to observe the Passover. The signals of Rome's power reign strong.

Yet Jesus comes in, not with an army, but with twelve disciples. As he comes in he asks not for a military headquarters or a forward operating base,

but instead seeks an upper room, a place to recline with his friends and share a holy meal together.

Oh, how disappointed must these Zealots be! They rolled out the red carpet, or at least the palm pathway and cloak covered cobblestones. They hailed Jesus as he entered with, "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" They offered him their allegiance, their swords, their lives, to battle the largest army of the most powerful nation in the world. And instead, throughout the rest of this week, the last week before his crucifixion, he teaches? Speaks in parables? Maybe this guy isn't who we thought he was.

So by the time Good Friday rolls around, when the chief priests and scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees all conspire to have Jesus crucified by

Rome, the Zealots, all of the sudden change their tune. Once political enemies, these unlikely allies join in this one common goal: to kill Jesus. Kill the one who has challenged our authority. Kill the one who challenged our assumptions about God. Kill the one who wasn't the Messiah we wanted him to be. And so our words mutate from "Blessed is He!" to "CRUCIFY HIM!"

Perhaps, we too, are Zealots. We sing and line the road with our coats and sway our branches. We give glory, laud, and honor to the King of Kings. We shout Hosanna in the highest! But when Jesus doesn't behave how we expect him too, when he doesn't conquer with a crushing battle or massive army, when he submits to the will of the people, follows the

road to the place of the skulls, when he allows his own death...Maybe this guy isn't who we thought he was.

We who claim the name God's people move all too quickly from palms to punishment, from joy to judgement, from adulation to abandonment.

Especially when God doesn't behave the way that we expect. You see, that's the core of this transition, from Palms to the Passion. God just doesn't act the way that the Zealots want, and much less the scribes and Pharisees, the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Everyone in Jerusalem expected God to be on their side, and no one ends up on God's side. When Jesus shows his true colors, those of mercy and peace, all

took away the branches of praise and nailed God to a tree.

In our own lives, how often do we fault God for failing to meet our expectations? Some of it just seems petty when we say it aloud.

*It's not that we don't need the rain, but all this weather is really cramping my style, keeping me from getting my tan or playing outside. And, well, that's God fault. It's not that we don't have money, but we just don't have enough to buy a PS4, an XBOX1, and a WiiU, you know, all the stuff that we want. And, well, that's God's fault. It's not that we don't have enough food, or a roof over our heads, but it's not steak or organic quinoa every day, and our house just isn't big enough or nice enough or in the right*

*place. And, well, that's God's fault.* Of course, we know that all this greed isn't truly God's fault, but if we're honest? We tend to blame God for it anyway.

But sometimes, we ask much deeper questions, questions that surely bring grief not only to ourselves, but to God as well. Why doesn't she love me the way that I want? Why isn't the cancer gone? How can you let so many innocent people die? Aren't you a God of deliverance? Didn't you say you'd help me, God?

You see, the Zealots were asking these kinds of questions, questions of depth and despair and hope. They were angry because God had promised a messiah, promised a ruler, promised a land governed by God's anointed one. And so, when this all seemed

impossible, when Jesus didn't fit the mold they imagined, they turned their backs on him. And we, too, imagine that we know what deliverance looks like. We know the kind of help that we want.

When my grandma Jeanette was dying, all I wanted was for her to live. She had her faults, and not insignificant ones – I've mentioned her before, you may remember – but even so, she was one of the most wonderful people I've ever known. She knew how to love and serve in ways that seem so far beyond my own capacity, and she taught me at least a fraction of that. As she aged, she did so with grace. She gave away her things. In fact, this ivory Last Supper used to sit on her shelves, until one day she caught me looking at it. "Do you like that,

Drewsie?" she asked with a smile. "It's beautiful," I replied. "Take it," she said. "I've enjoyed it for long enough, and now it's your turn." Even as she died, I wanted this kind of grace in my life, the kind that shared, the kind that lived to love. Not just for me, but for the world. She brightened this place, and so, deeply irrationally, I wanted this nearly ninety eight year old woman to live forever.

My last conversation with her was one of the hardest conversations I've ever had. The dementia had gripped her tightly, except for a few lucid moments. When I entered the room, she was muttering something. I assumed it was just her mind going more quickly. It seemed under her breath at first, but as I got closer, two things became audible.

Her sobs, and her words. "I'm ready to go God. Why won't you take me? I'm ready to go." I was such a Zealot for the kind of deliverance that I wanted, for what I thought healing looked like, for the kind of salvation I imagined, that I had turned my back on the kind of deliverance Grandma needed, the kind of salvation that God was bringing to her very, very soon. For too long, when God didn't fulfill my expectations, I thought it was because God just didn't care. But that day, when Grandma's eyes locked on to mine for one last time, when I realized that this wasn't dementia speaking but the cries of someone wanting deliverance from her own suffering, I knew that I tried to control God, to shape God in my own image, rather than let God be the

kind of savior that I needed, and the kind of savior that Grandma needed as well.

As we wave these palms today, we must remember that we call not for the Messiah of our expectations, but for the Messiah of the world. We hail not a conquering general, but a suffering servant. We prepare the way not for the destruction of our enemies, but for the construction of God's Kingdom. It is all too easy for us to move from loud hosanna's to cries of condemnation because God does not meet our expectations. So instead, we must call for the Messiah we need rather than the Messiah we want.

But that's the key to Palm Sunday. God comes to us despite our expectations. God lives with us despite

our dysfunctional view of the world. God lives for us despite our cries to crucify him. But instead of those words, let us put on our lips the words of this hymn:

“Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die. O Christ your triumph now begin o'er captive death and conquered sin.” God's deliverance, God's victory, doesn't come in the ways that we expect it. Neither does our salvation. But that's the point. When we took control in the Garden of Eden, we lost control of any good future. On Palm Sunday, Christ rides in, not to meet our expectations, but to overcome them, to retake control, even when that means he rides on to death. That is why we say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Surely that is worth our highest hosannas. Amen.