

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009

Mark 11: 1-11

Rev. Robin Sherman

I can remember vividly a particular Palm Sunday when I was no more than seven years old. Our church had always handed out crosses made out of palm branches on Palm Sunday. The CGIT and the Sunday school usually made them and my Aunt was the CGIT leader at the time. The group would come in on the Saturday and carefully fold the palms to create the cross, then they were left in the kitchen sinks overnight in cold water so they would not dry out. In the morning they would drain the water, dry the crosses and place them on trays to be taken to the doors of the sanctuary to be handed out to everyone who came in. This one year my aunt called in a panic; she had gone to the church and checked on the palm crosses and found that almost all of them had fallen apart in the water; she needed help and so my family went to the church and remade close to 300 palm crosses. It was a very late night for a six or seven year old, but it sure was fun to be at the church at night doing something special and unexpected.

Some of you may have similar stories of the things you have done through the years to prepare for special services or to do things for the church. I know for a fact that many of you do things almost daily for this pastoral charge and I'm wondering if you have ever thought about the things that you do for the church as preparing the way of the Lord because it is in doing these things that you are preparing the way of the Lord just as the disciples did when they went to get the colt and when they secured the room for the last supper.

Mark's gospel story of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem focuses not so much on Jesus as it does on the disciples who have been sent to get the colt. On Palm Sunday our focus tends to be on Jesus and yet without the help of the disciples securing his ride into town, the story may have been different. In fact Mark uses nearly half of his verses related to Palm Sunday to tell us how the disciples go about getting the colt. Isn't that odd at such an important event as this? Shouldn't there be more about Jesus, more about his reason for coming to Jerusalem, what he planned to do there, how he would win over the Roman Empire with his presence? In John's gospel Jesus enters Jerusalem on foot. And yet most often when we think of this story we picture Jesus on the donkey, not on foot. The story is etched in most of our minds through the gospel of Mark.

But Mark's focus is on the disciples. That band of people that in Mark's interpretation can't seem to get anything right. Mark has not given us the best view of these characters who are working with Jesus. In fact, he mostly shows us their flaws. We have read in past weeks of their incompetence, their inability to follow simple instruction or to decipher simple stories. They seem to always be in a flap, confused, misunderstanding their and Jesus' purpose here on earth.

In the section prior to this one in chapter 10 Mark tells us that the disciples were vying for special treatment; that John and James had just been asking if they could have the seats of honour when Jesus came into his glory; one on the right and one on the left. They had no concept of what this journey was all about. They still thought it would all end in an earthly kingdom, living in an earthly mansion, with all the rights and privileges of those currently in power.

How wrong they were in their assumptions.

Thomas Long, a distinguished preacher, professor and author of many theological books states that perhaps James and John were the two sent to get the colt. The disciples sent are unnamed and so Long speculates that it may have been them in answer to their request to be placed in seats of power they are instead given the mundane task of securing Jesus' ride. (Long, Thomas G, "*Living by the Word*" *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, p. 18)

Not much glory in this job; particularly when Jesus was planning on going full on into Jerusalem right into the hands of the power that was against him. The disciples thought this was time for their vindication, this was when they would see Jesus declared Messiah and they would become the new ruling parliament. Cabinet ministers perhaps, complete with long term health care and travel benefits and retirement funds.

How wrong they were in their assumptions.

Mark's gospel begins with John the Baptist crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord" and today, Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, we hear it again, "prepare the way of the Lord". What Mark is trying to tell us from this passage is that we are not the Messiah but we are the ones who prepare the way for the Messiah to come.

We, the disciples, do the mundane work that we sometimes feel is not important. We put on the coffee, we go to the meetings, we teach Sunday school, we open the door and turn on the heat and the lights, we change the numbers on the hymn board or order the palms for Palm Sunday, we copy all the hymns and prayers into the Easy worship program, we deliver sermons and crafts to the shut-ins, we visit in the nursing homes and hospitals, we bring goodies to the fellowship times and a casserole to the pot luck because it is through these times and places when we gather that Jesus has a way to enter.

I do not sleep well on Saturday night; in fact some Saturday nights I don't really sleep at all because I am worried I have forgotten something for service on Sunday or that something I have planned will not work or will not touch the hearts of those gathered. We disciples are the ones who wake up in the night in a panic; we prepare the way for Jesus to come into town; to come into our community, to come into our church, to come into our hearts. We deal with the mundane details so that when worship happens, when we gather together we are ready to simply allow Jesus to enter, triumphantly, completely, to bring us the love of God.

We are the preparers of the way. Hosanna, our King has come. Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Amen