

Leafy Branches and a Donkey: The Two Sides of Palm Sunday

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

24 March 2024

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Texts: Mark 11:1-11

Mark 14:12-25

“Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.”

~ Mark 11:7-8

Prayer

Prepare our hearts, O God, to reflect on your Word.

Silence in us any voice but your own, that,

by hearing, we may also embody the truth imbedded in the Bible stories.

Through Jesus Christ, the One who came in your name,

We pray. Amen.

I stand before you to preach almost every Sunday and I take very seriously my calling to bring whispers of God’s living Word to the Church through my sermons. One of my mentors during my first two years in parish ministry told me once that there is nothing more discouraging to the people attending a worship service than to get to church and have that awkward feeling that they would have gotten more out of their Sunday morning if they had done something else with their free time. So, every week I go through the same routine: before I start writing and once I finish the sermon, I pray that somehow the Spirit of God will speak to, at least, a few of you through the words of my mouth. As I struggle with each word and write out each sentence, I pray that in some way I could have never imagined God’s Spirit will use the sermon preached from this pulpit to lift up someone who might have been hopeless before entering this sacred space. My deepest hope as a preacher is that in some mysterious way the Sunday sermon will renew the faith of someone who might have been on the verge of giving up on the church before walking hesitantly into this sanctuary. Each Sunday morning, I walk up to this pulpit quietly praying that in some miraculous way, despite my Brazilian accent and choice of words, the sermon will touch and heal, bless and strengthen, inspire and compel God’s people to believe more fully and to live more faithfully.

Still, despite all my praying, I am very much aware of the inherently short life span of human words. Renowned religious scholar Martin Marty says that no matter how life-giving and even life-saving words proclaimed from the pulpit may sound, they are rather ephemeral in nature. Most sermons will have accomplished their purpose and goal quite successfully if they help people of faith put the message they heard on

Sunday morning to good work for the next seven days. The truth however, as disturbing as it may be to preachers like me, is that most words preached are forgotten by the end of the day on Sunday.

Martin Marty once shared the story about a British theologian who asked an audience of regular worshippers to try to remember five sermons they had heard in their lifetime. Everyone was stumped! A handful could remember bits and pieces of sermons preached on a special occasion, like at a funeral for a loved one; but most people had forgotten virtually all the sermons they had heard. Then the theologian asked the same group of worshippers to try to bring to mind five people through whom the hand of God was laid upon them. Quite amazingly, every person could not only remember but even describe those moments when other people of faith became incarnate agents of the healing and life-giving Word of God in their lives.ⁱ

The truth is that as important as words are in our faith tradition – after all, as Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans, “***So then faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of God***”ⁱⁱ – we still need more than the spoken word to experience the reality of God’s love, grace, compassion, forgiveness and liberating power. Words, even the ones preached from the pulpit, may be able to offer a momentary shelter in the world, quicken our imagination, inspire us to think about God for at least one hour during the week, even provoke us to take some action, but they are not enough to make us feel grasped, held and cradled by God. Only those people who are willing to become living evidence of God’s love; only those people who are willing to act out the words they say about God; only those people who are both brave and mad enough to dare to live as living, breathing, and walking icons – human windows to the divine – make the God of Scriptures corporeal, touchable, noticeable, visible, and memorable. What this means for us is that each one of you gathered here today is probably the most powerful sermon that can be ever preached and heard. For all the people who are hoping, longing, and even aching to feel God’s hand laid upon them, your life and your actions, your choices and your behavior, your kindness and your faithfulness, your love and your commitment to live out your faith with joy and integrity may well be the only meaningful experience of the Christian faith they will ever have. Whether you are ready or not to accept this challenge and this responsibility, it is you who are the most powerful sign of the nearness of God to anyone who is eager to sense the saving presence of God beyond this service that is punctuated with so many wordy prayers, wordy hymns and a sermon. Only your life can give form, movement, scent, taste and color to the Gospel stories and to the words we proclaim about the God revealed in the life of Jesus. Your life is the best invitation God could have ever offered to call the world toward the path that leads to God’s saving presence and steadfast love.

Jesus knew how much human beings long to have this real experience of the divine in our lives. He knew how much we hope to feel that God’s hand has been laid on us to bless us, comfort us, hold us, save us from our fears, our brokenness, our anxious living, our loneliness and from an existence without purpose. And in some way that we

cannot fully express in words, this young Jewish man embraced with passion this ideal of being God's Word to humankind. He immersed himself in the powerful and ancient words of the religion of his people and decided to hold nothing back. He gave his life entirely to the concept of a God which the psalmist declares as being good; a God whose steadfast love saves, transforms, challenges, heals and endures forever.ⁱⁱⁱ

And so, Jesus went into the dusty streets of the villages of Galilee to be where people were, where they lived, worked, got sick, where they made love and raised a family, had dreams and disappointments, where they cried, danced, and prayed to let his life speak of God's love for every single human being. Rather than using polished words and well-orchestrated rituals to share God's presence with the people who needed to feel the nearness of God, Jesus made the intentional decision to embody the vastness of God's steadfast love in the way he lived. And his life became a living testimony to this God who meets us where we are on our journey of faith; who promises to stand by our side even in the darkest moments of our lives; who rejoices with us when we are happy; and who loves us even though we have done absolutely nothing to deserve such life-giving and life-saving love.

The late Secretary General of the United Nations, the Swedish diplomat and peacemaker Dag Hammarskjöld was a deeply spiritual man. He kept a journal of poems and spiritual meditations that were published after his death in the early 60's. In one of his meditations, Hammarskjöld reflected on Jesus' brave decision to become God's Word to humanity until the very end. Speaking of the decisive moment when Jesus rode into Jerusalem carrying within himself a message, a proclamation of God's steadfast love for humankind, Hammarskjöld wrote: "***A young man, adamant in his committed life... alone as he confronted his final destiny... He had assented to a possibility in his being, of which he had had his first inkling when he returned from the desert. If God required anything of him, he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the Cross. He knew, though, that he had to follow... the road to the end... A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen.***"^{iv}

God cannot be fully expressed through words. God's goodness and steadfast love only become real through the committed lives of human beings like Jesus of Nazareth, who remained adamant in his determination to be one of God's best sermons ever proclaimed. He knew that there would be risks in his bold and passionate decision to personify and manifest the divine invitation to all of us to see in front of us a road of new possibilities: new possibilities for human life, human relationships, and human history. When Jesus straddled that young donkey and rode into Jerusalem, he knew that his action would speak louder than any words he might have preached in a synagogue or in the Temple. By coming into the city on Palm Sunday, Jesus made the earth-shaking statement that God refuses to be contained in sacred places, veiled by

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religious words, hushed by church singing or pushed to the peripheries of human life, but rather God chooses to be in the very center of life to give us tangible experiences of God's love through the lives of an adamant young man like Jesus or someone like you.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem he did not utter any memorable words, but he delivered a revolutionary sermon that has inspired Christians and people of many other faith traditions to live for a greater truth, a bigger vision of human life. He entered the city and sent shockwaves through the religious community that too often wants to capture God in human chatter. His choice to go into the city as the One who embodied a message from God made it quite plain that in order to preach God's love to humanity, we have to break through the shell of our comfortable religious services and take a few more risks for the sake of a world where Palestinians are being massacred while the United Nations plays diplomatic games and fails to call for an immediate and complete ceasefire that can stop the genocide in Gaza. Jesus chose to go into Jerusalem and strode toward a road of new possibilities so people of faith like you and me might also offer our lives as a path of hope for this nation where politicians attempt to restrict women's reproductive rights for political expediency. Jesus paraded into the holy city and announced the coming of a new reality grounded in love, so you and I would remember the growing number of people who are experiencing homelessness in MA. This adamant young man went right into the heart of the city where politics and religion mingled with the lives of common folks to remind us that every city is indeed holy, every place where human beings live is sacred, and it is our responsibility to go into those places where people live and long for freedom, for a blessing, for peace, for healing, for consolation, for God's love and let our lives be the answer to their prayers and a sign of God's presence within the messiness of human life.

Palm Sunday is more than just a day to remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Today is the day when we stare down the path Jesus chose to share God's love with the world. It is a path that leads people straight into God's heart, but this path is neither easy nor smooth! As the Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara once said very wisely and prophetically, "***We must have no illusions. We must not be naive. If we listen to the voice of God, we make our choice, get out of ourselves and fight non-violently for a better world. We must not expect to find it easy; we shall not walk on roses.***"^v

On that first Palm Sunday, I don't think anyone else other than Jesus could see where the road strewn with leafy branches and coats would take him. He had no illusions. Jesus knew that he was a dead man riding a donkey. Three times he had predicted what would happen in Jerusalem. "***See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.***"^{vi} But his love and his faith kept telling Jesus that he could do that hard

thing. He could smile at the branches of hope people were waving and throwing along his path while he rode adamantly to the city that would crucify him.

There are two sides to Palm Sunday. There is hope and despair. There is joy and pathos. There is passion and anguish. There is faith and doubt. There is elation and suffering. There is life and death. There is Good Friday and the silent wait for Easter. As Peter Gomes said, in this world of hope and tragedy, “**God’s love is the only thing that makes sense**” and “**God’s love does not do away with [the paradoxes] in our lives, God’s love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it and to pass through it.**”^{vii} On Palm Sunday, Jesus was determined to make real this very love that allows us to live with the unbearable contradictions of our lives and our world.

Jesus knew that the shouts of “**Hosanna! Save us!**” that echoed all around him were steeped in people’s longing for a new life, for a semblance of order in a world of chaos, for justice in a world of injustice, for guidance in a world of paradoxes, for peace and freedom in a world of violence and for a sign that God had not abandoned them. He knew that a man riding a donkey would have no chance against the powers of this world, but as ridiculous as it might seem, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that colt bearing the weight of the high hopes for new possibilities the leafy branches symbolized without forgetting that, like every good sermon, his arrival in Jerusalem would elicit interest, curiosity, hope, praise, reassurance as well as discomfort, rejection and anger. Jesus did not expect that he would walk on roses, still he let the donkey take him to the place where God would finish writing the best sermon every preached through his death and resurrection. Jesus let the donkey take him to a new paragraph in the story of his life where the “**Hosanna in the highest heaven!**” would turn into “**Crucify him!**,”^{viii} “**Save us now!**” would be replaced with “**Surely, not I?**” and palm fronds would become nails on the cross and the jubilant parade would end at the table of his last meal with his closest friends, where Jesus would break bread and say, “**This is my self which I am giving you, and this is how I will continue to be present with you after I am gone.**”^{ix}

The two sides of Palm Sunday remain with us: the leafy branches that embody our hope for a new life and new world and the donkey that takes us to the reality of human history where only the compassionate love of God can empower us to do the hard thing of letting God write a sermon of love and salvation through our lives in a world of irreconcilable contradictions.

I know you will most likely forget this sermon by the end of the day, but I pray that you will not forget that it is your life that makes God true and real. It is your life that points people directly to God’s heart. I pray that the life of the man who courageously took upon himself to be God’s living sermon to humankind will inspire you to be adamant about going into those places and life circumstances where people are longing to feel God’s hand laid upon them. The path to become God’s living word is not smooth,

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but remember that you are not alone. Christ who gave his self to you at the table and on the cross is still with you. Hold on the highest hope the palm fronds in your hands represent and let the donkey of faith take you where your life will bring hope for new possibilities. Being a living sermon is not easy, but as Carrie Newcomer sings:

***“You can do this hard thing...
It's not easy I know but
I believe that it's so
You can do this hard thing...
Impossible just takes
A little more time
From the muddy ground
Comes a green volunteer
In a place we thought
Barren new life appears...
You can do this hard thing.”^x***

Yes, friends! You can embrace the paradoxes of Palm Sunday, walk into Holy Week, face the cross, wait in the silence of Holy Saturday, rejoice on Easter morning and do the hard thing of being adamant about living as a memorable and unforgettable sermon of love that God is preaching to humanity. So, go from here and dare to believe more fully and live more faithfully.

May it be so. Amen!

ⁱ William Sloane Coffin in The Selected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, Vol. 1, p. xviii.

ⁱⁱ Romans 10:17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 118:19-29.

^{iv} Dag Hammarskjöld in Markings, pp. 68-69.

^v D. Hélder Câmara in The Desert is Fertile, p. 24.

^{vi} Mark 10:32-34. See also Mark 8:31-33 & Mark 9:30-32.

^{vii} Peter J. Gomes in Sermons, “Beyond Tragedy,” p. 70.

^{viii} Mark 15:13.

^{ix} Cynthia M. Campbell and Christine Coy Fohr in Meeting Jesus at the Table, p. 79 [Kindle Edition].

^x Song by Carrie Newcomer, You Can Do This Hard Thing, released on 07 April 2020.