

Sermon Title:  
Text: Mark 11:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11  
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April 9, 2006  
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
Palm Sunday

Though it's mostly masked in a deep sense of familiarity, if you get your mind into just the right place you can see that there is something exceptionally odd about the story that brings us together this morning. To be sure, everyone loves a parade, and year after year the Palm Sunday procession does not disappoint us. We may have heard the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem a hundred times, but still there's something there that engages us.

We can almost taste the dust stirred up by the excited crowds that swarmed around him as he made his way through the narrow streets, the children scrambling up the palm trees to tear off branches and throw them down to their friends standing below. We can all but feel the fanning of the still midday air as people took off their cloaks and spread them before the colt as it stepped its way nervously through the crowd. It's a story that sweeps us up, and brings us along in a whirlwind of high expectations and buoyant promise. Whether any of them actually believed it or not on that first Palm Sunday it must have been felt good to shout it out, as the occupying forces of the Roman Guard stood their watch on the street corners: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

And it probably feels just a little bit as good for us, who've placed our bets on the one who sits, at least in my mind's eye, at the center of this whirlwind, and yet a million miles away. Maybe, just maybe, our guy *is* going to win! But of course, that is precisely where the oddity of the story begins. We're close enough to the end of the College Basketball season to remember what underdogs and upsets are all about, but it's hard to imagine just how preposterous this all must have seemed from that Roman soldier who was leaning on his spear, and wishing to high heaven that he didn't have to wear that infernal helmet, and breastplate as if his job was to guard against the armies of Ptolemy, and not some ragtag band of Jewish losers. This Galilean peasant couldn't even win over his own side, and here they are, running about and shouting as if he would single-handedly overturn the last five hundred years of history! Have your fun, he might have said. Play your games, but at the end of the day, I'll still be the one standing on this corner with the spear in my hand!

The last person in all Jerusalem to disagree with him, I dare say, would have been the one who sat at the center of it all. You don't even have to turn a page in your pew bibles to know what was on his mind, as he rode into town. Mark's not very good at giving us time cues in his telling of Jesus' life, but it could have been that very morning, as they were walking on the road toward the city, that he'd said to his disciples, "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—(To that Roman guard leaning on his Spear at the side of the road)—they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." Whatever those milling crowds might have thought, to him it was clear: this joyful procession was really a death march, and by week's end, all would have turned against him. That's the irony of this day: before the first palm frond was torn from a tree we knew just where this was all going. Jesus himself told us. But we joined in, nonetheless.

What we're talking about here is *mindset*, and what I'm suggesting is that the deep temptation of this morning is to assume the attitude of the crowd. "Our God can beat *your* God!" We're gonna open a big can of temple-whumping, and make up for all those years of sitting in the back seat as the world goes merrily on its way! And the hardest part of it is that just as deep is the temptation to believe that Jesus really *could* do it that way if he wanted. He could take 'em all with *both* hands tied behind his back. Why, if he could calm a raging sea, and cast out demons, and restore sight to the blind, he could certainly put Caiaphas and Pilate in their places. That was the *crowd's* mindset, and truth be told, it's hard not to go there—to want desperately for this story to take a turn right here, and end differently. Take that Roman spear and thrust it deep into the heart of the corrupt temple cohort—let the New Age begin! That's the way it should have gone in the *crowd's* mind.

But of course, it's not the crowd's mind that matters, is it? Which is why, on every Palm Sunday the lectionary pairs the reading of the entrance into Jerusalem with Paul's words to the young church in Philippi, which in all likelihood were written a good 20 to 30 years before Mark's Gospel took the form it did. "Let the same mind be in you" Paul writes, "that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with god as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human likeness he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." If we are truly to understand the events which will unfold in the week to come, or for that matter this odd circus of a parade that sort of swept us all away, it will be *that* mindset—the mind of Christ, that will lead the way.

The whole force of the events that are sprung upon us in this week changes when we do just that. The dynamic of "crucified, dead, and was buried" is not, as is so often the case in the popular religion of a consumer culture, one less thing *we'll* have to do because Jesus did it for us. Rather, it suggests that in the dynamic of this week we see the fulfillment of what it *means* to be truly human. *Kenosis* is the Greek word, and if we had been raised in an Eastern Orthodox tradition, it would be as familiar to us as "incarnation" or "resurrection." It's a verb, and it means "to be poured out" like water from a pitcher. And it is the way in which, so this good Orthodox tradition teaches us, human living becomes *truly* human: when all our gifts, and abilities, our passions and strength are directed, not to ourselves, but on behalf of some other, whose need is even deeper than our own.

The mystery of the week that will unfold around us, then, is not "Jesus died for my sins so that I won't have to," but that in his dying, literally pouring out his life on behalf of those whose needs were deeper than their knowledge, *both* Jesus' humanity *and* his divinity are fulfilled—so that in that gracious act "at the name of Jesus" not in some exclusive, triumphalist way: *my* god beat *your* god, so now you've got to say, "Uncle!" Jesus is Lord more as day follows night. "Every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The triumph of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem rests, not in the mind of the crowd who would have made him king, and sent the Romans and their temple lackeys packing, but in the mind of Christ, who "humbled himself and became obedient even to death—even death on a cross." And here's the hardest, and most wondrous part of it all: it's as we let *that* mind be in us that the true impact

of this week will finally settle upon us—that we will, in the old fashioned words of faith, are *saved* by God’s grace, through faith. It’s not when Jesus does what we’d rather not have to do for ourselves, but when we become *Christ-like* that God’s saving work will finally be completed.

What all this suggests to me is that there is some way in which each of us is being nudged, or challenged, to just dip our toes into that *kenotic* grace—to pour ourselves out for someone or something *other* than ourselves, not because there’s a great return for us in the end, but because it’s the way to grow into our true humanity. You understand how counter this runs to everything else your world is going to shout at you—that you need to look out for number one; that you’ve worked hard, and earned everything you’ve got, and you should be able to do with it exactly as you please; that if others find themselves in need it’s because of their own bad decisions, and if you decide to help them it’s for *their* benefit, not *yours*!

It cuts as well, against the grain of what so much of our world thinks of in terms of a “successful church.” The question is not how many members are on your role, or how glorious your sanctuary, or whether there’s a program to fit the need and desire of each member, but rather how are we, as a community, bearing that “mind of Christ” into the world around us—which means not to judge all that which is not like us, or to cram everyone else into a spiritual mold so that they look like us, but to pour ourselves out into this world just as Christ poured himself out for us.

It means, at the end of the day, that this season of our Lord’s Passion is not something we can watch go by us once more, waving our palms, and singing a happy song. We can’t any of us *be* Christ. That was uniquely his place, there on the colt. But we can be *Christ-like*. And in so doing, the real power of God’s saving grace really may move among us, and lead us, through Gethsemane, and Golgatha, to that cave in Joseph of Arimathea’s garden, where we may learn that the victory *is* ours, through God, who saves us.

Let us pray.