

“Riding Into the Eye of a Storm”

Mark 11:1-11

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Today we focus upon one of the most familiar scenes in the life of Christ, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey as supporters surrounded him waving palm branches. This scene is familiar for several reasons. All four gospels record it and it has been re-enacted every year in Jerusalem since the 4th century. That tradition has spread to almost every Christian church in the world, including ours.

When I saw the children coming in this morning waving their palm branches, I was reminded of the story of the little boy who had to stay home from church on Palm Sunday because he was sick. When his older brother returned home, he could hardly wait to tell his sick brother what he missed.

“You should have been there today,” he said. “You are not going to believe this, but Jesus came into the sanctuary riding on a donkey, and we got to wave palm branches around him!”

“Aw man,” the sick brother said, “I can’t believe it. The one Sunday I miss and Jesus showed up!”

Let’s talk about the significance of the day that little boy missed.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. A crowd gathered around them, which was not unusual since people traveled in caravans. In all likelihood, the number of people around Jesus swelled to even greater numbers because he taught as he walked, creating a mobile classroom.

As they approached the city, Jesus sent two of his disciples into a nearby village to secure a colt for him to ride on the final leg of the journey. It appears Jesus had already arranged for this to occur. He told the disciples exactly where to go, what to look for and what to say if anyone asked them what they were doing.

When the disciples returned, Jesus mounted the colt and began his descent into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Many around Jesus spread their cloaks or branches on the path before him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Upon arriving in the city, Mark writes that Jesus entered the temple, looked around and left with the disciples to go to Bethany for the night.

What is the meaning of all of this? Was this a parade, a protest march or a funeral procession? According to Dr. Fred Craddock, it was all three.

However you interpret it, there is no doubt Jesus was riding into the face of a storm. His life was already in danger because the authorities were looking for him. So, why did he do this, especially when he had been reluctant to call attention to himself his entire ministry?

He had something to say to the religious leaders and this was the time to say it. Because of their addiction to power, prestige, attention, control, money and possessions, many of the leaders were using religion to control and exploit people. They were not honest, compassionate and humble as the prophets demanded of God's people, especially those in authority. Instead, they were selfish, greedy, conniving and corrupt, and Jesus was going to expose their hypocrisy.

In Mark's account, what did Jesus do the next day? He returned to the temple and created a scene by over turning the tables of the moneychangers and driving out the merchants. He chastised them for turning this house of prayer into a den of thieves.

How did the religious leaders react? They were incensed and vowed to kill him before the week was out, which they did.

So you see, Jesus was actually riding into the eye of the storm. He did not slip in discreetly under the cover of darkness, but followed Solomon's example at his inaugural when he rode his father's mule in the procession (1 Kings 1:38).

"Life is not for the timid," Garrison Keillor often says. It certainly wasn't for Jesus that day and the rest of the week.

Where are you in this story? Like Jesus, are you riding into the eye of a storm? Are you facing a daunting challenge? Are you being led to confront injustice by speaking truth to power? Has life dealt you a severe blow? Are you traveling down an unfamiliar road with blind curves and landmines?

How do you feel? Afraid? Anxious? Overwhelmed?

What do you need? I suspect you need courage, just as Jesus did. Where do you find this kind of courage? Jesus relied upon God to provide it. "Do not be afraid," he continually reminded his disciples as he assured them God would take each step with them and help them to meet their challenges head on.

Are you in the crowd which followed Jesus into the Holy City, offering encouragement and support? You may not be riding into the eye of a storm this morning, but you know someone who is. What can you do to help them? How can you support them at this critical time in their life? What could you do or say to lift their spirits and give them strength to confront their challenges? Ask God to show you and follow His lead.

Are you needed behind the scene to help someone fulfill their mission and achieve their potential? Each time I read this story, I am impressed by those unnamed characters that never made it to center stage and the spotlight, but who were essential to the cause.

Certainly the disciples fit into this category. We don't know which two were sent to fetch the donkey and colt.

In addition, we know nothing about the man who owned the animal upon which Jesus rode. Whoever he was, he had to trade his plans for this colt for a divine plan which would exceed all his expectations.

My friend, Allen Walworth, says this man had to release his clinched fists, which were holding tightly to the reins of this special animal, and open his hands to let it go. Furthermore, he had to do this on nothing more than the simple request, "The Lord needs it." This entire story hinged upon the response of that man to this request.

It is not easy to let go of something we have and the dreams which accompany it. When we give it to God, however, we can be assured it will be used in ways we could never imagine to make the world better and advance His kingdom. This man's donkey would have never ridden into history had he kept his fists clinched.

Perhaps he inspired Jesus to open his hands when he was placed on the cross, and whisper those words voiced in the Garden of Gethsemane, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” I want to believe Jesus’ hands did not need to be pried open like many were at a crucifixion. Instead, he voluntarily opened his palms in an ultimate act of obedience and trust.

I admire people who turn clinched fists into open palms. Perhaps this is the true meaning of “palm” Sunday. **It’s not about the palms which grow on trees, but the ones in our hands which can grow the kingdom of God by responding to His call and helping those in need.**

Will you adopt this additional image of Palm Sunday and open your hands to take God’s hand and respond to the needs of those around you? What a difference this will make in your life and others if you will.

