

“The Turning Point”

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Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 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. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”’ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 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. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

‘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!’

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.

John 12:12-16

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna!

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!’*

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

*Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!’*

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your Holy Spirit. I pray that You would take the words and thoughts that each of us have, the words that we've heard read from scripture, those that we've offered in song and in prayer, and that words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ, a word that nurtures our faith, a word that grows within us and changes who we are, a word that guides us into this world as agents of grace and peace and love. Let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us. We ask this all in Christ's name. Amen.

So just as the announcement comes on the airplane when you're sitting there, you're invited to remain seated and to have your seatbelts fastened at all times because the sermon may get a little bit turbulent. I have cut and pasted as best

my memory canto provide some of Karen's sermon. She's got a great story which I'm going to totally reimagine because this is what I have in front of me. It's a sheet of paper that's the reading. I have the woman's name, where she moved to, her neighbor's name, and the rest of it I'm going to make up as best I can. Please note that all errors and omissions are mine and mine alone and that her sermon was probably way better than this is ever going to be.

She chose to do two Gospel versions of the same story. And the reason that she did this is because each of them is looking at the same thing, but coming at it from different directions, different agendas, written in different times. The Gospel of Mark was probably written about 30 years after Jesus, after Easter Sunday. And the Gospel of John, [to an estimate?], was written as the last Gospel possibly 100 years after these events took place. None of them are writing things down verbatim as they happen, and more importantly, neither of these readings are being prescriptive about what Jesus is going to do. These are stories that are being remembered and retold for the upbuilding of the body, and each of them lifts up different aspects. In the Gospel of Mark, the reading, it seems like Jesus is very meticulous about what he's about to enter into. There are steps on a list and he's kind of taking each step one by one. In the Gospel of John, there's a very brief announcement that there are people at the festival, Jesus was coming, they took palm branches, they were shouting, he sat on a donkey which fulfills Psalm 1:18. And then probably what is the most important aspect of this for our purposes, the short ending in this reading, his disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered, then they had the 'aha' moment and said, "Oh, wait a second, remember he told us that this stuff was going to happen, and wasn't it written somewhere? Let's go find it." And they wrote these stories down. Because as they looked backwards they realized that Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament, and that the things he was saying about what he was going to do actually came true.

So in a sense, Palm Sunday is a looking back in the rearview mirror to understand what God is up to. And this is not a bad way to do faith. In fact, it's really maybe the only way to do faith. We must look backwards at what is happening in our life to see God's presence. Rarely, if never, are we aware of God doing something in the moment. And extremely rare are those times when we know something's going to happen before it does. Those things do occur, but they are the rarest of rare moments in the life of faith. And here in the Gospel of John, we have warrant to not have foresight or even sight within the present moments, but to have hindsight - as they say, hindsight is 20/20 - but even in the Gospels we know that's not true because there are four different versions of the same story, each of them telling it from a different perspective. Each of us, in our own lives, love to tell stories. And the question is, what kind of story do we tell? It's Palm Sunday, the choir comes in waving palms, we sing beautiful songs, we have prayers, we have worship, the expectations are starting to build. We know there's a parade. It's a wonderful kind of celebratory event. And we know that Easter is only around the corner, just one more week. And we get to sing. And we get to do, "He is risen, he is risen indeed." I'm already practicing because I know I'll be told that 100 times and I'm practicing my response. He is-- "Oh, yes indeed. Yeah, yeah, yeah." And it's all good, right? And happy.

It's kind of like those cards people send out for Christmas or New Years. Do you get those postcards now with the little pictures of different things and their life, sort of the Glamour Shots? So Jani's with her sister in Houston, hopefully not watching this, because I'm going to rat on her a little bit [laughter]. She has a friend who worked with her in the family center that when she retired she and her husband moved to be with their children who owned a vineyard in Napa, California. Wow. Everyone's going, "Oh [laughter]." Uh-huh. So we get a card and there's like seven people, one of whom I recognize, sitting in the bucket of a tractor parked in a vineyard with fall leaves. They're all smiling and beautiful. And I think to myself, "Man, I wish I lived there [laughter]. They're in a vineyard and I live in Kirkwood [laughter]." But I'm sure that's not what they're trying to communicate, right? You know the pictures of the skinny people who are on the beach in Fiji and they weigh 100 pounds and they're all suntanned and their teeth are shiny and they're all waving in unison [laughter], coordinated swimsuits? Those are the kinds of pictures we get at those things. Why? Because we're doing the celebration, the happy version. Here's the frosting of life, if you will. And I wonder when will we get the picture of the person in the basket that the ski patrol has when you crash into a tree and break your leg and they're laying there bundled up being led down the hill and there's the peace sign sticking up [laughter]? That's the one that I'm going to send someday [laughter]. And I'm not saying that those things are bad. Those are great celebrations. They're marker moments, they are the things you want to lift up and celebrate in your lives, but what it does is it diminishes those other parts of our life.

In a sense, if you will, it takes the frosting and it just says how great things are and it leaves the cake. There are no cakey parts. Or as someone said earlier, sometimes all we have in life are crumbs. And if we miss it, we look at Jesus'

journey this week and we think, "Oh, it's all just frosting." Jesus rides in, people are singing and shouting. He goes through a little bit of tough times, but then on Sunday next week, we know that he's going to conquer death and rise again. If we go too fast between now and next week we miss, I think, some of the greatest witnesses that we can have to our faith and that we can provide to our neighbors in need. Jesus rides in to town on a colt, people have gathered in the street, they're waving palm branches, they're singing Hossana in highest as he's going by, they're laying down cloaks and palm fronds, and while they're doing that there are Roman soldiers sitting on horses, white horses, watching what's happening through the city of Jerusalem. People gathering, Jesus on his way to the temple on a donkey or a colt. So he comes in humble as a servant, not as a conquering hero, but as a humble servant he's coming to Jerusalem and to the temple to do what he has already decided is his purpose, which is to be hung on a cross and then to rise again.

He knows what his journey is about. And we need to realize that in his entry and in a humble way *we* are invited to be humble. When he rides in on a colt, we can realize that we don't need to show just the glamour shots or the frosting of our life, that it's okay to be real, it's okay to be who we are. The world pushes everything at us to be better than, faster than, richer than, smarter than. You name it and you can do it better if you only had this. That's what advertising is all about. And the Gospel message runs completely counter to all that. It invites us to honor what is really happening in life, invites us to honor how the spirit stirs among us in unexpected ways, not just on the celebrations, but also in the times of trouble and despair. Karen found a wonderful story to capture the sense of God at work in unexpected ways. It's the story of a woman named Annie [Cardel?] who moved to Summerville, South Carolina when she retired. Summerville South Carolina is mostly a black town, Annie is a white woman. And when she moved into town everything was fine, there was no racial tension that she was aware of, things were going fine. And then one day she decided to honor some of her heritage, so she put a flagpole in her front yard and she hoisted the Confederate flag. Her neighbor, a woman named Juanita, after a week of walking out to get her paper with the first thing that she could see being the Confederate flag, she decided that she needed to talk to her neighbor.

So she went over to Annie and said, "You know, I appreciate that that flag represents and honors your ancestors, but it does not do that for mine." Jaunita was not white. She was a black woman. Well, Annie and Juanita had a little bit of a conversation, and Annie decided, "You know what? I'm perfectly within my rights to fly this flag. I'm going to do it. And if you don't like it, tough." After another week or so, Jaunita rallied some neighbors who rallied some friends, and they decided they were going to protest in front of their neighbors' house. So they brought signs of love and anti-bigotry, and all kinds of things, and they just walked on the sidewalk, back and forth in front of Annie's house. The next week, as you can imagine, Annie, who's not very happy, decides to get her friends to walk on the other side of the street, and they're all waving Confederate flags. And now you've got two groups that are walking on the sidewalk back and forth, pretty much just yelling at each other. Simmering disquiet. So Juanita says, "You know what? I've had enough of all of this. I'm just going to build a fence." So in her front yard, she builds an eight-foot fence - not in the back, but in the front - she builds an eight-foot fence so that when she goes out of her front door, she cannot see the flag on the pole. She gets her paper, goes back in. But still, there's that simmering disquiet. Annie, after the fence goes up, does the next best thing. Right? She goes and gets a bigger flagpole. Raises the flagpole higher so that the flag can now be seen over the fence, and the whole thing just continues to escalate.

And then one day Annie Caddell has a heart attack. And as the EMTs are wheeling her out of her house, literally, her life flashes before her eyes. She gets to the hospital just in time to be resuscitated. After a lengthy stay, she survives and finally moves home. As has happened to many people that I know in the life of this church, a near-death experience for Annie changes everything. In a sense, that near-death experience from a heart attack unzipped the protected layer that she had carried on herself her whole life. All of a sudden, she was vulnerable and gentle and honest. As often happens, she is regretful for all of the hurt and harms that she had done in her life. She said that as she was laying in the hospital room thinking about coming home, she knew that the first thing she was going to do was take down the Confederate flag and fly the South Carolina flag. She thought that might be a healing move for her neighborhood. She also hoped that eventually, Juanita would be willing to take down her fence in her front yard. Annie said she was most surprised though that she got home, her neighbors, even those that were protesting against her flag, came to her door, brought her food and were willing to go to the post office, the bank, and do whatever she needed. She realized that these were neighbors that were loving her just as she was. And now she was thankful.

My prayer for us, who are sitting here today, is that it will not take a heart attack for us to open our eyes and to realize that we can decide to do harm or to do good. We can decide to hate or to love. We can decide to forgive or to remain

bitter and cold. God's desire is for us to take that clothing off, that protective layer off, and to throw it away. This is the week in Jesus' life when he has done that. All of the Hosannas and the shouting and the hopes about a kingdom and Jerusalem being restored. All of that is done, but in such a different way so few of us see it. Even his disciples did not understand these things at first. But when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. Let us decide to remember now that God is good, that God's love is for us, and that as God's people, we can share that love with everyone through our faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.