

“The Surprise Ending”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Matthew 21:1-11

*O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;
God's steadfast love endures for ever!*

*Let Israel say,
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'
Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.*

*This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
The Lord is God, and God has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.*

*O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.*

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion,

*Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Matthew 21:1-11

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, your word is the living word. It invites us to constantly reflect and grow, be refreshed and challenged. Be with me this day as I share the word and may we all wrestle with your call to us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Matthew's reading tells us of the joyous parade that takes place at the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and people are cheering in anticipation of the long-awaited Messiah. But the truth is that we who stand on this side of the cross are aware of what is coming — the betrayal, the arrest, a trial and death on a cross. Yet each year we remember this story of Jesus' entry and its surprise ending. We are reminded that the life of Jesus is more than about the celebrations of Christmas and Easter; that it also has times of challenge and struggle and sorrow.

As I read Matthew's perspective this year, I was reminded once again how each gospel writer is very unique including specific details that reflect the writer's particular knowledge of Jesus woven together with their Jewish faith. Now the Gospel of Matthew, if you look at it, begins with a genealogy, and it's a long genealogy. It covers 42 generations and I will not read it today. It begins with Abraham and ends with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Matthew invites us to understand in no uncertain terms, that this Messiah-man, Jesus, is truly a descendent of David. Matthew's gospel also contains more of the passages from the Hebrew scriptures than any of the other gospels, and it forms a kind of bridge from the Hebrew scriptures to the Christian scriptures. Matthew does something else kind of unique. Matthew seems to find a real parallel between Jesus and Moses. He sees Jesus as the new Moses, for like Moses, Jesus is one who leads his people from slavery into a new kingdom, into a new life.

And if you read their stories, you see how many parallels there are woven in and out of this gospel. Remember Moses' story. He is saved from certain death that was ordered for the children of the Hebrews. His mother puts him in a basket of reeds in the river where he is rescued and secretly raised by Pharaoh's daughter. But Moses always remembers that he is one of the Hebrew people. As a young adult he leaves for his homeland but in time, God calls him back to Egypt so that he might lead his people to freedom. Moses approaches Pharaoh and pleads the case, but Pharaoh's heart, we are told, is hardened and he will not allow the people to go. One after another

of plagues comes upon the land. It is the crowning blow, the death of the first-born sons of Egypt that turns Pharaoh's heart. He tells them to get out. The slaves gather what few things they have, make unleavened bread and led by Moses, hurry out of Egypt. But then Pharaoh changes his mind and he comes after them. Yet they still manage to escape. And so for them, on the other side of the Red Sea, it is a time of joy and deliverance and Miriam leads them in song.

Think about the story of the birth of Jesus. Wise men following the star enter Jerusalem, they innocently ask questions of King Herod about where to find this king that's a baby, and understandably, Herod is angry. He is no fool, though. He placates them. He gives them just enough information and then he says, "And when you find him, come back so I can worship him, too." He wants to get ahold of this imposter. But warned in a dream, the wise men go home by another way. And when Herod realizes they aren't coming back, he orders that all the first-born sons are to be slaughtered. But Jesus is out of harm's way, because Joseph was warned in a dream about Herod and they flee to—where else--Egypt. In the years that follow, they return home and Jesus grows up unscathed and, as time unfolds, he begins his ministry and calls people into a new kind of freedom.

So today we arrive at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Matthew makes it very clear how the signs of the prophet about the Messiah are being fulfilled with the waving palm branches and donkey and the colt referred to in the Psalm and from the words of the prophet Zechariah. Like Moses, Jesus seeks to lead the people out of slavery, slavery to the laws that make so many people outcasts and sinners as well as from the Romans who control their lives in such profound ways. Considering the Moses connection should we be surprised, then, that later this week, Jesus will ask his disciples to join him for a meal, the Passover meal, to remember what happened when the people of Moses were led out of Egypt into freedom.

We also find that just as a Pharaoh threatened Moses in his life twice, another Herod appears in Jesus' life. I think there are two other important parallels. Consider what happens with the Hebrews. They have that initial joy of having escaped through the parted sea, but the struggles soon begin. They wander in the desert for years. They are hungry and thirsty. They struggled and argued and squabbled with Moses and one another. At times they wondered, "Would I have been better off back in Egypt and never having left?" They are overjoyed, at first, but then reality sets in—the reality of the journey. But we learn that's not the end of the story. They persevere. After years they arrived in the promised land, freed from the drudgery of Egypt and the wilderness. They can worship God. They create a place of home.

Matthew tells us something similar. At first those shouting "Hosanna" are thrilled. The Messiah has come, the one they had longed for. Surely now they would be relieved from the oppression of the Romans. The end is in sight. Jesus will triumph and be Lord and Savior and King of the Empire. But that's not the end of the story. For those shouting, "Hosanna", there is a surprise ending. The events of the week will unravel and unexpectedly end in the death of Jesus.

So why do we need to remember this? Because we need to remember the whole story, the good, the bad and the painful, so that we don't cheapen the story or simplify the challenges of faith. I found myself thinking of the words of the Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel. For many, many years after his rescue, he was quiet and silent. But then he began to write and speak. He shared the memory of the Holocaust alive for a reason. He said, "We need to remember so that we do not forget." Remembering keeps us honest about the difficult things. It can hopefully make sure that

such things don't happen again. And remembering helps us to keep open to the power of hope that other endings may be written.

So I think that's what we are called to do during Holy Week—to remember. Remember so we do not forget. For in remembering we remain honest to the whole story, that while God so loved the world, God sent his Son for us, but it was a gift with a cost. And that while Jesus does triumph over death, there is still more work to be done. We are reminded that faith and the way of love can be challenging and difficult and that when we feel we are in a wilderness time or face violence or challenges that are difficult, we remember, too, that God is always with us. We remember because we must persevere with the truth and hope and seek another way. I think we remember this story so that, as one pastor wrote, we do not slip into the temptation “to remake Jesus and his mission in our own image.” For as those at the parade found out, “Jesus was a different breed of Messiah” He did not attempt to win by violence or overtaking the empire. Jesus knew that for the Romans, they believed “their power was in the threat of death to those who opposed their empire,” but he triumphed by being willing to die in the name of love and faith before overcoming death. “Jesus didn't come to create a new and mightier empire. He came to replace it. He comes with a different set of expectations “and reminds us that we should, too. Jesus did not come to lord over the empire, but to be the Lord of all life. By following him, we are reminded that faith is not about the prosperity gospel and the accumulation of wealth as what God hopes for us. Rather faith is about what we do with what we have to empower and serve and reach out to others.

While what happened on that week was, for some, a most surprising and disappointing ending. We are called “to follow the way of the cross,” not just this week “but in our daily lives,” to remember that Jesus did not come on our terms, but God's terms. So while “our joy will be muted this Holy Week, it is not diminished. We can be empowered and moved by what God in Christ has done. Jesus rode into Jerusalem in triumph, not to establish or destroy an empire, but to destroy the powers of sin and death and to set us free. It has long been the joy of God's people to sing songs of freedom when times of suffering have come to an end. Moses' sister, Miriam, led the people in song on the other side of the Red Sea. David sang his way into Jerusalem as king. The people of Israel sang on the way home from exile in Babylon.” And our lives and faith can also be an endless song, as we celebrate the freedom offered to us in Christ. “Every Sunday echoes the hosannas of this day, for Christ who was to die, enters in triumph, not only into Jerusalem that day, but into our hearts every day. So let us sing. Let us sing 'Hosanna' with joy.”¹ Amen.

¹ Paraphrase and quotes from sermon by Rev. Dr. Luke Bouman Tree of Life Lutheran Church, Conroe, Texas, taken from Textweek.com under Palm Sunday materials for April 9, 2017