



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“A Victory Too Soon”

Mark 11:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11

Palm/Passion Sunday

Today is the church’s celebration of Palm Sunday, as we saw by the procession of palms this morning in worship. Palm Sunday celebrates the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, at the start of the events of Jesus’ last week of ministry, called “The Passion”. There’s an account of this parade in all four of the gospel records. Let’s read Mark’s account this morning. Find Mark, chapter 11, and we’ll get a sense of the excitement around Jesus at the start of this Holy Week. *[text]*

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem shows us one of the most conflicted moments in his ministry. Here’s a great version of the scene from the Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rick musical play, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Listen for the cross-currents in this raucous scene.

[“Hosanna!” from *Jesus Christ Superstar* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, original cast album/CD, MCA Records, 1970. Slides change with the song words]

Jewish pilgrims from all over the world always came to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiest day on the Jewish calendar—the feasts of Passover and of Unleavened Bread. The population doubled, or tripled for those weeks. During Jesus’ time, under the cruel domination of the Roman Empire and its troops stationed in garrisons around the country, Passover was the time when the faithful would especially bang on God’s door for God to rid His Promised Land of these pagans and their taxes. “Maybe God will send us another “judge” (as in, The Book of Judges) to lead us, and God will fight for us to drive the Romans out.”

That day, some were in the crowd because they saw it was a parade, and “everybody loves a parade”. Others in that crowd had heard about a “Jesus of Nazareth”, and were curious about this fellow from “nowhere” now coming to “play the big time” in the Capital. They sang, “Hey J.C., J.C., you’re alright by me.” But those looking for the liberation of God’s people from Roman rule and corrupt Jewish kings had their own song. They were singing, “Won’t you fight for me?” And all of these were true, all at the same time.

It seems to me that Jesus’ own disciples were pretty excited about this parade and response of the crowd. The display of affection and loyalty—laying cloaks on the ground for the donkey to trample, waving palm branches to draw attention and show loyalty (like when children wave little American flags at a visit of the U.S. president—in all this, the disciples did not notice the cross-currents—or perhaps the disciples felt all of those same things, themselves. The gospels show that even up to and through his death, Jesus’ disciples still did not “get” him

But Jesus has his own song to sing. He understands that people say many different things about him. He sits on a donkey, so he’s raised about his immediate disciples, and he can make eye contact and indeed, smile at the crowd, even if they don’t understand anything correctly. But

for the revolutionary guerrilla soldiers hiding in the crowd who want a military leader, Jesus' choice of the donkey has another message: "I am not the military man of violence you hope for. That is not God's will or way here."

It's those terrorist wanna-be's who have the most pull in the crowd. And they are the ones who make the authorities most nervous. The religious and secular leaders are united in wanting to get Jesus out of the way, lest there be a riot and the Romans come down hard on everyone, and perhaps even remove some of these leaders from their seats of power and influence.

The revolutionaries in the crowd see Jesus on the donkey, and they are unsettled. They get together at night and talk about Jesus. They go out in the next days to hear him teach. Jesus does nothing to incite the crowd or recruit allies. He teaches about –God. When he says, "The Kingdom of God," instead of picturing present Palestine rid of Romans, Jesus talks about treating people well, no matter what social group they come from. "That kind of pap is not going to cut it," they say in their night meetings. And in just a few days' time, this same group of now-disillusioned men of action will turn against Jesus for their own reasons: *he's built up the big following that we need to get Rome gone, but he's mis-leading them away from conflict with the authorities. Let's get this imposter off the stage, so we can step in and lead this group in God's revolution!* These are the people who on Friday—amidst many of the others in this Sunday throng—will be first to join the religious leaders in their chant, "Crucify him! Crucify him!", raising it to a bloodthirsty pitch so that the Roman governor will crucify this Jesus of Nazareth, and maybe turn back to us Jesus Barabbas, the real revolutionary who was arrested in a terrorist raid last month. "Crucify the Nazarene!"

On that first Palm Sunday, to most everyone and especially to Jesus' own disciples, it looked like victory was at hand. They think, *this had to be the goal of Jesus' teaching and miracles and healings!* They think. But it was a victory too soon. And it would not last. Bitter defeat lay ahead, just days away—the death of their leader and brother, and Lord.

Did you know that the ashes we use on Ash Wednesday come from burning the palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday? This is such a great symbolic act. The victory of Palm Sunday becomes the sign of the cross on our foreheads.

We can be so wrong about how we size up life. How many very smart people were sure housing values would continue to go up, and only up, *and only a fool would miss out on the opportunities to flip houses for fun and profit?* Here are some other great misses. In the year 1870 the Methodists in Indiana were having their annual conference. At one point, the president of the college where they were meeting said, "I think we live in a very exciting age." The presiding bishop said "What do you see?" The college president responded, "I believe we are coming into a time of great inventions. I believe, for example, that men will fly through the air like birds." The Bishop said, "This is heresy! The Bible says that flight is reserved for the angels. We will have no such talk here." After the conference, the bishop, whose name was Wright, went home to his two small sons, Wilbur and Orville. And you know what they did to their father's vision.

Or, how about the the Swiss watchmakers in the 1960's? For more than a century the Swiss had dominated the watch industry. In 1968 they commanded 65% or the world market and 80% of the profits. But in 1967 the Japanese were open minded and the Swiss weren't. In

that year Swiss researchers invented the quartz watch. The Swiss watch manufacturers rejected it because it had no gears or springs. In short, it wasn't made like a watch is "supposed" to be made. The Swiss were so certain the quartz watch would never sell, they didn't even protect their invention with a patent. They displayed it at the Annual Watch Congress in 1967. The open minded Japanese saw the potential of a watch that is 1000 times more accurate than conventional watches, and went from 0% of the world watch market to global dominance in less than a decade.

Yes, we often think we know what's going on, only to find out we were badly mistaken. But we were never designed to be so sure of ourselves, really. Think back to Genesis, chapter 3, where Eve and Adam are tending to God's earth, and a sneaky snake suggests that God has not been leveling with his first humans when God told them to not eat of The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The snake insinuated (insinuated--don't you love that word?!) that God did not have their best interests at heart—that God was lying to them to protect his own interests and dominate them. Well, that made “the forbidden fruit” all the more attractive. Eve and Adam never asked God about the serpent's suggestions; they ate, and their first benefit of suspicious of God was shame—they realized they were naked and the made clothes they had never known they needed before, and they started hiding from God. Good start, huh? And it went from bad to worse. One thing the account of our First Parents' expulsion from Eden shows us is that even in a simple world, our First Parents could not handle this knowledge of good and evil. The fact was, they were never meant to have to carry the burden of judging right and wrong on their own, since they were designed to live, trusting God's leadership. The capacity for judging rightly had not been built into their design, because of course, there would be no need for such a thing. They would always choose to stay close to God in trusting love. God had faith in them, even with the free will He gave them. God trusts us more than we trust God.

We are the children of Adam and Eve, and we have inherited their limitations and the pride and shame of their rebellion. We are so impressed with ourselves. We feel the need to be smarter than the next guy or gal. We do not live in intimacy with God or with each other. We are fallen, defective creatures, doing the best we can, and all on our own, if we do not have God leading our lives as He designed us. The “law of unintended consequences” rules when we live on our own.

Contrast our childish, selfish, suspicious nature with what the Apostle Paul wrote to his dear Christian sisters and brothers in the Greek city of Philippi, about Jesus. [*text Phil. 2:5-11*]

Jesus' Triumphal Entry was a forerunner of defeat. Jesus' defeat and death was victory. Who knew?

Jesus' Triumphal Entry ought to teach us to hold back on our judgment of good and evil, right and wrong. If we are going to know what right and wrong truly is, we have to get it from God. We have to know God, hear God, discuss our ideas with God, obey God. Often what we see before us is “beside the point”. It's like training all year for a track race. On the day of the race, we line up at the starting line, and at the sound of the starting gun, we leap out of the blocks, and run the best race of our lives. But unfortunately, we lined up on the wrong side of the line, and ran in the wrong direction. All our good effort was “beside the point”.

Sometimes we are encouraged to pay attention to the wrong thing, and we miss what's most important. One example: before the arrival of their son, a husband and wife attended

birthing classes at the hospital. One day they toured the maternity ward. The instructor told all about what would take place while they were in the hospital. In passing, the instructor said that on the last evening of their stay they would be treated to a complimentary dinner for two, and mentioned the menu selections. As they continued the tour, the woman was thinking about all the exiting things that would take place when the baby arrived. She turned and whispered to her husband, "Honey, I'm getting so excited." "Me too," he replied. "I'm going to order the lobster." Yes, we can be easily distracted about what's more important.

So what are we hearing from God's Word this morning? First, we can be wrong. A lot. And we can also be wrong about why we've been wrong. Second, we were never meant to make judgments about good and evil on our own, because we don't have the capacity for it. So much of the world's trouble stems from this original sin we keep repeating and repeating in ever-new ways. Third, God knows. God—and Jesus—knew what was going on in the so-called Triumphal Entry. The disciples would "get it" much later, as they spent time with God. Fourth, we can make better decisions—and often withhold hasty decisions—by spending time with the God who knows. This will guard us against claiming victory too soon, or proclaiming "Mission Accomplished"—only to find out we were far from the truth. Fifth, we need to adopt the attitude of Jesus—humble, riding on a donkey, ready to serve others. If the Son of God could do it, so can we.

This Holy Week is a great time to apply these lessons from our Lord, and to practice more fully what Jesus did then, as well as what Jesus might do today. Don't be distracted by present events and perceptions. Take it to God. Follow God's lead to the real victory: a life lived for and with Him.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on April 5, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]