

PALM SUNDAY
LENT 6 – THE WILDERNESS OF HOLY WEEK

(04/14/19)

Scripture Lesson: Zechariah 9:9-10
Matthew 21:1-11

“Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If any one says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and he will send them immediately.” (Matthew 21:2-3)

Today is the sixth and final Sunday in Lent. It is also known as Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, which is why the liturgical color is red. Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, a time when we reflect on the last days our Lord spent on earth in human form and their significance for our own spiritual journey.

This Lenten season, we have been focusing on the wilderness experience. Holy Week, itself, beginning with Palm Sunday, could be seen as a wilderness experience—a wilderness experience for both Jesus and his disciples. It certainly fits the general guidelines we have been considering in our Lenten series. It is a time of distress and difficulty, even suffering. It involves what could be considered a crushing defeat. Yet it ends in triumph, in a spiritual transformation for Jesus, for his followers, and also for us! It ends in resurrection, in new life!

Holy week certainly begins on an upbeat note! The day that we celebrate as Palm Sunday is a day of triumph for Jesus and his followers. The simplest form of the story, the version that is presented in the Gospel of John, describes the demonstration as a spontaneous acclamation of Jesus on the part of a group of Passover pilgrims. They hail him as “the son of David” or “the King of Israel.” However, as we heard in our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, he is also regarded simply as “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.” This is the version that speaks most directly to me.

The writers or compilers of the gospels do not tell us why Jesus is entering Jerusalem. The tradition that they received and recorded is descriptive--it contains the account of Jesus’ deeds and words with no speculation as to what he meant or intended by them. It is important to remember that to the four evangelists, Jesus is mysterious and holy. His presence evokes awe and wonder. For them to analyze his motives would be presumptuous, to say the least!

We in our time are obviously not constrained by feelings of awe, wonder, and humility. We *do* wonder why Jesus goes to Jerusalem. He never states his reasons or his intent clearly to

his disciples. If he would like something specific to happen, if he *intends* something specific to happen, he does not let them know what this is.

Perhaps Jesus wishes to make an appeal of some kind to the nation of Israel. If so, what better time and place than when everyone is gathered together in the holy city of Jerusalem for the Passover? Perhaps he wishes to confront the religious leaders with the claims of the kingdom of God, that they might repent their abuse of power and follow the path of righteousness. It may also be that Jesus is simply carrying on his ministry of teaching and healing, and this is nothing more than the next step on his journey. I find I am inclined toward this last option.

Jesus is well aware that it is dangerous to make this particular journey. He knows that death is practically certain for someone who either claims to be the Messiah or who is proclaimed as the Messiah by the people. Such claims will anger the Jewish priesthood and threaten the Roman authorities. In this light we can view Jesus' careful preparation for his death. Jesus is prepared to die, knowing that through his death the greater cause for which he came will ultimately triumph. And, as we know, it did!

If Jesus was a king, as some of the people claimed, he was certainly a new kind of king. King Saul and King David were known for their military power. King Solomon was known for his wealth and wisdom. Jesus enters the holy city as a meek and humble king. He does not enter on a warhorse, but on a donkey. His followers carry palm branches, not spears. The songs of children, not the shouts of soldiers, are his welcome. All he needs is the service of an unknown friend.

This morning I would like us to think for a few moments about that unknown friend. As we heard in our gospel lesson, Jesus calls two of his disciples aside. He tells 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.

Who is this man, the owner of the colt and the donkey? It is possible from this account and the detailed preparation for the Last Supper to conclude that Jesus has an underground following of disciples who live in the Jerusalem area. This is Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem. However, it is possible that he has friends in the city, people who support him and his mission.

Jesus and his disciples stop to rest in a little town just outside Jerusalem. The disciples enter the city, find the donkey and the colt, and begin to lead them away. When the owner of the

animals that are being liberated questions what the disciples are doing, they simply say, “The Lord has need of them.” This is all the man needs to hear. He gladly gives his animals to the one whom he recognizes as Lord, the one he knows to be the Lord.

When God asks something of us, how do we respond? We have many abilities, many gifts, many possessions. How do we respond to God’s need for us, for who we are and what we have? As we discussed in our study group this past week, the psychologist of religion C. G. Jung believes that as much as we need God, God also needs us. All we have and all that we are is a gift from God, but this gift is only on loan. The Lord may call in the loan; its return may be demanded at any time.

The conversation between the disciples and the man might have happened differently. It might have gone as follows:

“Hey, what are you guys doing with that colt?”

“The Lord has need of it.”

“What do I care what he needs? It’s my colt. Get out of here and leave me alone.”

Such a refusal sounds heartless and selfish. Our judgment of the man, were he to deny the disciples’ request, would be as harsh as our judgment of the innkeeper who had no room for Mary and Joseph in his inn. But would the man’s refusal be that different from our refusals?

“God needs your time.”

“Sorry, but I’m busy. I have so many things to do.”

“God needs you for some task.”

“Sorry, but I can’t take on anything more.”

“God needs your presence in worship.”

“Sorry, but Sundays are my only day off.”

“God needs your treasure to build up his kingdom.”

“Sorry, but I can’t raise my pledge to the church or give to missions. My credit card debt is already out of sight.”

The idea that *God needs us* is counterintuitive. God is the creator; we are the creation. We live in a state of absolute dependence upon God. We stand in constant need of God’s love, God’s guidance, and God’s healing power. What could God possibly need from us?

The disciples struggle with the same question in relation to Jesus. Only a few days following his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus goes into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. This is truly a wilderness experience. He, the King of Kings, is in great need. He experiences great

distress, perhaps even the agony of feeling abandoned by God. Jesus needs his disciples to be with him. He needs his disciples to pray with him. He asks them to be there for him, to be there with him that he might not face the unfolding events of Holy Week alone.

I believe that Jesus was in much more agony than the way he is depicted in the painting of him praying alone in the garden, a painting that graces the left wall of our sanctuary. In this painting, Jesus is kneeling with his hands folded, looking up to the sky. He seems to be at peace. If this were truly the wilderness experience for him that I suspect it was, I doubt if he was as composed and peaceful and trusting as is depicted in this painting!

His disciples aren't there when he needs them. They fall asleep, not once but twice. He had asked so little of them. "Stay awake." "Pray with me." "Don't leave me alone."

I suspect the disciples didn't really believe that Jesus needed them. When they got tired, they simply curled up and went to sleep. They desert him at the moment of his greatest need, just as they would desert him the following day when, except for the women and one disciple, he suffers the agonies of crucifixion alone.

We are like the disciples. Like them, we have something that Jesus needs. We have something that God needs. We have something that the world desperately needs.

Each of us has gifts and abilities. There are people in our life who need exactly what we have, and there is a church right here who needs exactly what we have. How will we respond when we, like the owner of the colt, realize that our Lord has need of what we have?

The owner of the colt gladly gave what he had because he recognized Jesus as Lord. How could he withhold anything from his Lord? If we recognize Jesus as Lord, how can we withhold our resources, the resources of our time, our talent, and our treasure? How can we refuse to offer who we are and what we have for the Lord's work?

Several of our Holy Week hymns speak to this theme. They remind us that we, like the disciples, often fail to respond to our Lord's need. We sing these hymns during our Maundy Thursday communion service because they serve as a prayer of confession.

This coming Thursday, we will sing William B. Tappan's hymn "Tis Midnight; and on Olive's Brow," which was written in 1827:

*'Tis midnight; and on Olive's brow
'Tis midnight; in the garden now,*

*The star is dimmed that lately shone;
The suffering Saviour prays alone.*

*'Tis midnight, and from all removed,
E'en that disciple whom He loved*

*The Saviour wrestles lone with fears;
Heeds not his Master's grief and tears.*

We will also sing Johann Heermann's beautiful hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended." The words, which were written in 1630, are a powerful testimony to the events of Holy Week as a wilderness experience—for Jesus, his disciples, and also us:

*Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended,
That man to judge Thee hath in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected, O most afflicted!*

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee: I crucified Thee.*

*For me, kind Jesus, was Thy incarnation,
Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life's oblation;
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion, For my salvation.*

*Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay Thee,
I do adore Thee, and will ever pray Thee,
Think on Thy pity and Thy love unswerving, Not my deserving.*

"Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay Thee." Actually, this is not entirely true. In one sense it is true that we cannot repay Jesus for his great love, for his great sacrifice. However, like the owner of the colt, we *can* respond to his requests; we can respond to his need. We can become his disciples and his apostles. We can become his hands in the world of space and time. When we return to God what God has already given us, just like the owner of the colt, we will not be depleted or diminished by our generosity, by our outreach to others. We will get it back. In fact, we will get it back many times over!

What we give will be transformed by becoming a part of the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God that Jesus both preached and lived, the Kingdom of God that he calls us to experience and then to share with a world that desperately needs it.

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