

Palm Sunday April 17th 2011

Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Matthew 21:1-11

Good morning! Welcome to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. I was delighted when Stew invited me to preach this Palm Sunday. It's been quite a while since I have been challenged with this text. And it is a challenge; any preacher will tell you that. Besides the fact that the story is very familiar and comes up annually in the lectionary causing one to wonder if there is anything new to say about it, There are at least two other reasons why it is hard to preach on the Palm Sunday text.

The First reason is that on the surface this passage tells the story of a festival- a big national holiday with all the gaiety, celebration and little kids running around that we associate with holidays like Memorial Day or the Fourth of July. Everybody has the day off. Everybody is there. There's food and stuff for sale. There is even a parade! But OUR problem is that it's hard to enter into all the shouting and excitement of

the crowd without feeling like phonies- actors in a chorus who chant Hosannas because that's the part we have been assigned.. We know what comes next. We know that in just a few short days the Hosannas will become angry taunts and the adoring crowd will evaporate - even Jesus closest friends will desert him. The whole passage creates a kind of cognitive dissonance in us. It's a celebration but it just – off- somehow.

The second challenge is that, of all the text we read in Lent and Holy Week, Jesus entrance into Jerusalem is the most blatantly political. Over the years, whenever I have had the opportunity to wrestle with this text, there has been a life and death struggle going on somewhere in the world that superimposes itself on this story. This year it is the masses of Middle Eastern men and women who have spontaneously taken to the streets and city squares in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. I see their dark eyes, their head scarfs, their curly hair and new beards their sweat stained shirts against a backdrop of palm trees and sand and I think that these faces must be exactly the faces that Jesus encountered

long ago in Jerusalem--expressions filled with equal parts wild hope, deep yearning and terrified confusion about what the future will bring. If the crowd succeeds in throwing off the yoke of authoritarian rule what then? Like those of Jesus time, these crowds have no experience with anything but oppressive authoritarian rule. What courage it takes to stand up against a dangerous “known” and have no idea what unknown order comes next.

In their book titled, The Last Week: what the Gospels Really teach us about Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem biblical Scholars Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg use their knowledge from non-biblical sources to imagine not one Palm Sunday procession but two.

One was the peasant procession described in Matthew. From the East, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives cheered by his followers from the peasant class who placed their clothes and branches cut from palm trees before him as he entered the city. But From the west, the authors imagine Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Iduea, Judea and Samaria, entering Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry

and soldiers. Although unfamiliar to us, imperial processions were well known in the Jewish homeland of the first century. Crossen and Borg invite us to imagine the spectacle “..A visual panoply of imperial power, Calvary on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and goals... and the sounds marching, creaking of leather, clinking of bridles, the beating of drums the swirling of dust.”¹

These two parades could not have been more different. Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power but also Roman imperial Theology. The emperor of Rome was not simply the ruler of Rome but the Son of God. And while the errand on which Jesus sends his disciples as he prepares for his entrance seems peculiar, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. By riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey Jesus uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah that would have been familiar to this Jewish Crowd. According to Zechariah, a king, a Messiah, was coming to Zion “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a

¹ Borg, M. Crossen, D (2006) *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach us about Jesus Final Days in Jerusalem*. New York:, Harper Collins p.1-3

donkey” (Zech 9:9). The rest of the passage from Zechariah details the kind of king that will come

“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem. And the battle bow shall be cut off and he will shall command peace to the nations” (Zech 9:10)²

On that long ago Palm Sunday the restless throngs of pilgrims who gathered in Jerusalem were presented with a very clear choice. On the one hand the promised The Prince of peace riding in on a Donkey or on the other, the Roman Governor and his warrior steed. And it is clear to anyone what the sensible, practical choice should have been.

The donkey had no hope against the war horse. The peasants had no chance against the soldiers, Life for these Palestinian Jews was short and brutal but it was at least familiar, and they had never experienced any other kind of order than the one imposed by Roman might.

But herein lies the Good News of Palm Sunday. Against all the odds on that day, in that place, they all got it right.

² IBID. pg. 3
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It was before the Nazarene on the donkey that they spread their garments and laid their palms. It was to Jesus not to Pontius Pilate that they cried out in their native Aramaic “Hosanna” which literally means “Save us” or quite simply “Help”! In spite of all earthly evidence, despite the personal cost to each one of them, they recognized that Jesus came to offer a freedom completely different from anything they had ever known. The man, whose feet dragged as his donkey plodded into Jerusalem, carried a love so profound that it provoked spontaneous courage from this oppressed peasant crowd; a courage so contagious that for that moment at least the stunned might of Rome could do nothing but stand aside and watch.

Whatever was coming, whatever happened later- On Palm Sunday, we celebrate the first time The Son of God -The King of Kings came to walk beside us in all his humble glory, and our eyes were opened and we ALL recognized him. On Palm Sunday we catch a glimpse of what his coming kingdom will like. We see that all of Rome’s might and the world’s agenda cannot stand against it.

Yes, soon enough the Romans regained their earthly control and the crowds dispersed to their squat and crowded huts but behind the doors, closed against the soldiers, they whispered the story- “do you remember?” “Did you see him?” “Wasn’t it amazing”- and the seeds of Christian faith were planted deep in the sandy soil to germinate and burst forth on another day and year and century after century.

To be Sure, the disciples who got it right on Palm Sunday, later got it wrong when they abandoned their teacher and friend, beside whom they had walked beside so proudly.

Yes, they got it wrong, on the terrible night of the garden arrest and on the endless Friday where they fled and hid in fear, But they would get it right on Easter Sunday when the women came to them in “terror and great joy”; when they ran to confirm the empty tomb,

They would get it right on that Easter afternoon on the Road to Emmaus when a stranger came up along side them and they invited him

to home to supper and their eyes were opened and they recognized him when he broke the bread.

They would get it right when they jumped out of their fishing boats and swam to join him for Breakfast;

And Thomas would speak the truth, when he put his fingers into the Lord's wounds and proclaimed "My Lord and My God."

The Proclamation of Palm Sunday is no less true and Right, just because the crowd was made up of flawed human beings who later wavered in the confusion, pressure and contradictions of the days that followed.

Like those in that crowd, we too do not always understand, or make the right choice or proclaim the truth. But OUR failings do not make God's truth any less TRUE

It is not easy to be a Christian. And it may even be getting harder. In our own strength, we will inevitably fall short in our effort and desire to be faithful. But God is coming, The Lord is here, God is making his way through our throng and The Lord's success does not depend upon

us- Whether we get it or not, God is working his will in the world and we do not need to be anxious about whether God will ultimately be successful. We can stop worrying about how much everything seems to be changing, or whether the church will survive or faith will win out or goodness will prevail or Life will win out over death. It will! In God's time, in ways we cannot imagine or predict.

It will! In ways that will involve us in things too marvelous for us if we are waiting and watching.

And that is our job! To look down the road and to be ready.

To look for Palm Sunday opportunities to recognize the one who comes in the name of the Lord whenever he comes- and where ever he appears.

Our job is to point out the Jesus that might be riding incognito into a skeptical, wounded world. To remind everyone who is suffering and in pain that the one who comes in Peace, humble and riding on a donkey- is the very one who will help us, save us, set us free from whatever it is

that binds us and crushes us. We are called to run up along side him and ask him prayerfully, regularly what we can do to help bring about his kingdom.

On Palm Sunday that ancient crowd got it right- and because they got it right, we are part of the story of Jesus bringing salvation to the world. Every time we get it right there is the likelihood that we will get it right again, that we will recognize him the next time he comes until over time we see him everywhere and our getting it right wins out over our getting it wrong.

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord

Hosanna in the highest heaven.

Amen.