

Philippians 2: 5-11
Mark 11: 1-11
March 25, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday

In his 1896 commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Ezra Gould gives me an “aha!” insight. He observes that up to the point when Jesus enters Jerusalem, he is acclaimed as a prophet of God—by many people, *the* prophet of God. In this he follows in the line of Moses and Elijah. His message has consistently been about the kingdom *of God*—not about his identity and claim to worldly power.

And yet Jesus’ family line runs through the lineage of King David. Prophets have foretold that the messiah would emerge from the line of David, the son of Jesse. Jesus’ identity as king, while proclaimed by the wise men is *not* part of Jesus’ self-proclamation. He is more comfortable in the role of teacher—rabbi. He clearly identifies himself with the prophets. Thus, in Matthew, Jesus weeps for the holy city:

Jerusalem! Jerusalem! The city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” (23: 37-39)

Rev. Gould suggests that it is the emergence of the Jesus’ identity as king and messiah on Palm Sunday which fuels the drama of his entry into Jerusalem and, indeed of the events which tragically culminate of Good Friday.

Nobody knows what Jesus told the disciples about his plan for the day. Some Bible commentators infer elaborate and careful planning as if Jesus is orchestrating a grand display to rouse the crowd and to proclaim himself as messiah. Mark’s account suggests something less

scripted and more spontaneous. When the colt arrives the disciples throw their cloaks on its back and Jesus mounts.

The procession begins at the top of a ridge called the Mount of Olives which looks down on Jerusalem. Tradition held that when the messiah returned he would appear on the ridge and enter the city by the east gate. The road Jesus travels is steep and stony. The path moves through an olive grove. On his right is a garden called Gethsemane. In just a few days he will find himself alone, pleading with his heavenly father to spare him the agony that awaits him. On his left is the sight of his ascension into heaven. He is not thinking of these things. Indeed we are not privy to his thoughts. Perhaps he has no thoughts. He is simply mindful of descending the long rough stone path and following where it leads.

Because this is a narrow road there is little room for large crowds. Mark tells us that “many people” spread cloaks and leafy palm tree branches on the road. I believe we are meant to believe that the disciples are pleasantly surprised that, in the absence of a publicity campaign people lined the road to hail Jesus. This number would increase as the procession nears the gate and enters the city.

The question arises, is the crowd hailing Jesus the prophet or Jesus the messiah? Is he the messenger of God or the God-sent son of David who is liberating Israel from Roman rule and initiating a new era of the rule of God?

The signs certainly point to the expectation that Jesus is the messiah. His entering Jerusalem on a young donkey recalls the words of the prophet Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem.
Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he; humble and riding
on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (9:9)

And yet these very words are full of tension. The Hebrew translated here is not describing the entry of a conquering hero. The English translation we heard badly skews the meaning. The literal sense of “triumphant and victorious” is accurately captured by the King James Version which reads, the king “is just and (has) salvation.”

Yet as scholar Elizabeth Achtmeier points out, this salvation has not happened yet. The king will face opposition and indeed will suffer. God through Zechariah says that “they will gaze upon him who they have pierced and will mourn for him as for an only child.” (12:10) There is no sense that this king is *already* victorious. This is the meaning of the king being described as “humble.” Again I prefer the KJV’s use of the word “lowly.” It expresses the fact that this king cannot be victorious on his own. It will not be his victory; it will be *God’s victory*.

I propose that here is the heart of the drama of Palm Sunday. For the two years of his public ministry Jesus has been a teacher and healer. His confrontation with the religious leaders has marked him as a prophet. The sub-text of his being the much anticipated messiah, the king of Israel has remained in the background. Now he is ready to claim that identity. Yet even before Jesus says a word or takes a step he is at cross purposes with what the people expect. *Jesus is not already the victorious conqueror! He is has not already experienced redemption himself and thus he is in no position to offer it to others.* No one knows this better than Jesus. As joyful and believing as the crowd is, they are joyful and believing about the *wrong things*. This is underscored by the very word used by the crowd, *hosanna*, which literally means, *save now!* They are expecting the revolution to begin immediately with Jesus at the head. That is why God through Zechariah says the king comes lowly, humbly. This king knows that he is not worthy of the praise he is receiving. He cannot meet the people’s expectations. His true purpose will

involve a profound and painful disillusionment. This disillusionment will be followed, as it always does with anger and rejection. In Jesus' case, it will result in the demand for his death.

Jesus' descent down the steep stony road from the high ridge of the Mount of Olives is more than a movement of a body down a hill. It is deeply personal and acutely intense spiritual journey. It is a lonesome valley that only Jesus can travel through by himself. Indeed the descent down the Mount of Olives is a wonderful illustration of Paul's beautiful words to the Philippians. It begins with Jesus as the second member of the trinity, descended from that lofty status to become human—the form of a slave. But the descent does not stop there. Paul says that Jesus humbled himself still further, “and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

For Jesus it is an intentional descent from the triumphant military leader to a rejected man, broken on a cross. It is the path Jesus said all who truly trust him must follow. It is the path we will follow this week. In the days to come we will recognize how much we hold onto the things of this world and how much we seek a messiah to make the world right. Yet until he returns we are his living presence. We are the ones who witness to the truth of his life and death. Amen.