

Standing in the Crowds
Jubilee Mennonite Church
March 25, 2018

Purpose: To celebrate the triumphal entry as the inauguration of life giving newness by the challenging way of the cross.

Message: As we allow ourselves to travel with Jesus even into the depths of despair, we are reminded that even there he, and we are not, shall not be abandoned by God.

Scripture: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (focus—I will read), Mark 11:1-11

Synopsis: This is an odd day to be sure. After weeks of anticipation and deprivation (even just from Chocolate), we have arrived at the end of the journey. As is the case with all such things, we are often inclined to join in and relish the party atmosphere as Jesus comes to the holy city and simply move from one party to the next as we celebrate the ultimate triumph of Easter. Yet, we know where this road leads, and that there are many steps between where we are and where we will be in the light of Easter morning. As much as we might hesitate to recognize ourselves there, we know that we too might be in the crowds of Good Friday, crying for the death of the one we now hail as king. Yet, despite this, Jesus holds open the door for us to follow where he leads: not the path of power and privilege, but of true passion and hope.

This service is a weird one; we wish to begin with the joyful procession and end knowing where the procession leads. The ‘third act of the service should lead us out into the darkness of holy week to come, wanting the stripping of the sanctuary to move us toward the cross.

Notes:

http://www.evernote.com/l/APlw3O4p3xJMJaU6laU_1WWnuXNxZdx1Ic0/
<http://www.evernote.com/l/APlxpdmNJjJN6qO6fgeC3DFNFT0wPB837hY/>
<http://www.evernote.com/l/APkNTi5EUnZDqIplpdGw2j2JU-9FTqYODVc/>
<http://www.evernote.com/l/APmeJL3GOYZKLR7EY-UBkv4GKo2c5eAWsqg/>
<http://www.evernote.com/l/APneRGbzFtVHGL2fRGH-AGXDnsOoAZtctc/>

Psalm 118

A Song of Victory

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
- ² Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever
- ¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
- ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- ²³ This is the LORD’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.
- ²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

I have to say, I don't much care for the task of preaching Palm Sunday. How's that for a way to get things started? It's not that this parade story is well worn, though it is. Exactly how many times can we walk the same path from Bethany into Jerusalem the ultimacy of this week? How many times can some one like me stand here and try to explain it all and sound in any way fresh or particularly insightful about the meaning of it all? Jesus initiates the ride to the end, coming to the holy of holies of Jerusalem, fulfilling the gist of this Psalm, and electrifying all those who saw it. Never mind that a couple days from now there would be a profoundly different parade as Jesus made his way with the cross. Never mind that I find it likely that the very people lining the road hailing the conquering hero as the one who comes into the name of the Lord will be crying differently just several days later. None of these familiar tropes are really the problem though. It never hurts us to live these again to capture the meaning of these most critical and blessed of days. But we know this well, and many of us are well familiar with these mean streets of the festival Jerusalem.

Why I don't particularly care for the task of preaching this particular Sunday is for another reason all together. I don't like preaching this story, these aspiration of the Psalms in reference to Jesus Christ lived out in the story we heard and saw a couple moments ago because I am not sure that what is needed here, is anything I can provide you by way of commentary, oratory, or analysis. In many ways, the best we can possibly do with stories such as these, knowing that the rejoicing of this day does not last, but takes us to the unimaginable places of political intrigue and state sponsored execution is to live with the story as it is for what it is: the story of Human insolence and certainty being encountered by God with the worst possible results. We, we humans, we mortals, we beings created in the image of the most high set to the specific task of trying our very best to kill God for being God. How is that for a statement to kill a good parade, to bring a party to a screeching halt? Most anything I can say, add or explain here will simply insulate us from this fundamental truth: that Christ comes to the place where God lives, displaying the life that God wants for each and every last one of us, and we limited humans kill him for it. God brings us God's best; his only begotten Son, and we do our worst and turn around and nail him to the cross. I don't stand here as a prosecutor pointing the finger at the likes of us, accusing we as a congregation as doing the deed like Cornel Mustard, In the Conservatory with the Candle Stick like the old game of Clue. Rather, I stand here to tell the

truth: what begins here with such great promises does not and cannot end well. As the preacher, I have the rather dubious honor of coming along in the middle of party and pop the bubble of our rejoicing and remind us all of the dark side of what this is all about. I would much rather keep the party going, keep shouting hallelujahs and hosannas all the way through what would come later until it all goes away. It is easy for us to include ourselves in the crowds of this day shouting love and admiration and conveniently exclude ourselves later in the week from those screaming for the one who comes in the name of the Lord to be crucified.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus has time and again knocked aside anyone who would call him a king, despite all his talk of the kingdom coming. Every time, from the temptations in the desert all the way through to last days, every time power was in his grasp, he would turn away, saying that this was not his way. Yet now, in this procession, even as unusually composed as it is, he is taking on the very air of regal life that he had avoided all his life. The crowds love it; here is one who comes in the name of YHWH, the one who was spoken of for so long who was to be the cornerstone of the new kingdom has come at last. Here is one who has come to the very gates of righteousness, and rides into their situation of need and want of liberation; liberation from the Romans, from the repressive religion of rules and regulation, from the poverty that binds them, from all that would bind them. In this procession he seems to be finally embracing the kingship that has been waiting for him, and even the rocks and stones can not but shout for joy.

Such is the case until the Jerusalem crowd comes to understand that what he is offering bears almost no resemblance to the kingship that they want. In this procession, Jesus is offering to the people and powers a way of the kingdom that is based compassion and inclusive, non-destructive justice. That they cannot embrace because the price of instituting such a kingdom that relies on love and right living is far more costly than what the system of power and politic can bear, so they reject it. And what a rejection it is. When they see what Jesus is offering, they cannot let go of their entrenched ideas of who and what this king should be and what he should do for them, and their adulation turns to outrage. They, and we like them are happy to watch the parade, but following along, coming along side? That is something else entirely that pushes us pretty far.

Palm Sunday reminds me of a scene in Mel Brook parody of the western films Blazing Saddles. This might be rather obscure for some of you, especially the younger ones, but it is a great parody all the same. A small town is being terrorized by a marauding band of outlaws and calls desperately for a Sheriff to come and rescue them. When they hear that a Sheriff has been dispatched, they are overjoyed and turn out in all their civic finery to welcome the new Sheriff to the town, watching for his arrival over the horizon. When the sheriff is spotted, they ring the church bells, strike up the band and prepare to meet their savior. All of this continues until they see that the man who rounds the bend happens to be black, much to their shock. The party is instantly over, and they threaten Sheriff Bart at gun point. The whole movie is a racial parody, but it does have a way of driving home a point.

It is easy to sit here from this vantage point where we know the story and say that we surely would have gotten it, that we would have been able to lay aside any misgivings that we might have had and jumped right into this offer of a new kind of king and a new kind of kingdom. It is easy for me to assume that I would have had the spiritual insight to see things as they were with Jesus on the donkey, and would have fallen in lock step behind. To stand certain like Peter at the Last Supper and declare “surely not I Lord; I will never abandon you.” But I know better than that. I know human nature better than that. We are bonders with the stuff of life. Even the meaningless stuff and fluff of life grows on us. In graduate School I would enjoy myself by sitting in different places all the time. I helped me pay attention with a different view now and again. But many of my classmates took clear exception: I was not allowed to be in their spot. They had, despite no rule to the contrary come to understand what ever random real estate they marked out as their own. To have me disrupting that put some noses seriously out of joint. So when we get ourselves that substantially put out over something this petty, how much harder was it, how much harder is it for us to give up our expectations and our hopes of what a king and kingdom should be in order to take Jesus up on his offer of a different kind of royalty? Our hopes, our passions, our fears, our expectations for the world are the very things that we cling to the most tightly, altering them only under the greatest of stress or only when we see without a doubt that they cannot be achieved in the way we wanted them to be.

This is true, isn't it? This is who we are. I have no problem seeing myself not only in the midst of the crowd of Palm Sunday, hailing the coming of the Son of God to the Earth, where we like to be, but also in the midst of the disappointed crowd who was unwilling to let go of how things should be that I had put onto Jesus. The more that we can see this, and accept this, I think the better we can place ourselves within the story: in both sets of crowds—the one that hails and king and calls for his death for disappointing what we expect of him.

We do ourselves a favour to strip away as much as we can of the sameness of this week and to live it as fully as we may. I challenge you: read the whole of the passion story. The one in Mark is fairly short and to the point—two chapters verses 14 and 15. Read any version you like, any Gospel you like. If you do, read it with this in mind: where do you put yourself in the action? Where would you want to stand? Where do you think you might end up standing scene by scene? What might we learn if we dealt with the story with this sort of honesty? What do you see? What do you feel as you are there in these days that our Lord is crucified? What new truth might be opening up for us?

May we each come to know all the God is and what God is doing as we walk alongside living again these the most important days of all.