

20 March 2016

From Triumph to Courage
Mark 11:1-11; Mark 14:32-50 (Palm Sunday)

The palms of our procession this morning come from the story of Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. We read the account of that event from Mark, chapter 11, verses 1-11.

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

In so many ways, this is what we want church to be – a Triumphal Entry. Or at least a triumph. It was joyous, loud, crowded. There was a sense of excitement that was only increased by being shared with others. And it was more than just infectious group excitement; it was the excitement of being part of a group with a shared goal, a common purpose – all acting with one will, singing in one voice.

When we find this sort of feeling in church, it fills us with energy. This is the energy of the Methodist camp meeting, the tent revival, the youth rally, the Billy Graham crusade. And to a large extent, this is the energy that has drawn people to the modern Contemporary Worship service, which generally involves twenty minutes of standing shoulder to shoulder with a crowd of other worshipers, singing simple choruses loudly, looking up at a screen (rather than down at a hymnal). It is – at least for many – a deeply affective experience, and just as in the Triumphal Entry, a lot of it comes from being part of a crowd. We simply sing better and with more energy in crowds. The composer and church musician John Bell says that if we're more than three feet from our nearest neighbor, we sing softly because we're afraid they might hear us, but if we're closer than three feet, we sing louder because we *can* hear them. It's easier to let go of our inhibitions in a crowd. It's even easier to believe. C. S. Lewis comments somewhere that it's easier to believe when surrounded by others who share our faith. It makes us less hesitant, less self-conscious, more . . . triumphal. As I say, in many ways, this is what we want from church.

So it's odd, when you read this passage in Mark, to see how indifferent Jesus is to the shouting. He does nothing to encourage the crowds. Quite the opposite. He enters Jerusalem, goes to the temple, looks around, then tells his disciples, "It's late. Let's get out of here." Now

I've been to enough Total Quality, Good-to-Great, Unlocking-the-Leader-in-You conferences to know that this is bad. They *all* stress the importance of making the most of momentum. You get something that people are excited about, and you push *that*. After all, it's really hard to get a locomotive moving from a standstill, but once it's moving, it's hard to stop it. There's another illustration, too, something about a flywheel. I forget them all. But Jesus has a whole crowd behind him, ready for instructions, and he ignores them and goes to bed.

Maybe this is because he knows that crowd excitement is based on emotion, which changes quickly. If so, he's right; it will. Come to our Good Friday service and pay attention to the same crowd then. More likely it's because as excited as the crowd is, Jesus knows they're excited for the wrong reasons. They think he's come to lead a revolution against Rome, and he hasn't. You see, the problem with group excitement is that it's not necessarily for a good and important purpose. The passion that stirs the crowd at a camp meeting is very similar to the excitement that fills the crowd at the Final Four, or at a Rolling Stones reunion concert (the "I Ain't Got No Metumucil" world tour). The emotional frenzy you see at a youth rally is the same as that at a Packer game, or at a Donald Trump Rally. To return to that C.S. Lewis observation: yes, it is easier to believe when we are in the company of others who believe, but we need to remember that in the company of like-minded people, it's easier to believe *anything*.

At any rate, Jesus doesn't seem impressed.

* * *

Deliver us, O God, from easy Hosannas.

both from shouting praises to you in the excitement of a crowd
and from reading the words automatically in a liturgy.

Preserve us from praise that is based entirely on emotion,
and from praise without any feeling at all.

We would praise you as whole people,
with our hearts – in song and smile, in dance and despair
with our minds – in doubt and conviction, in certainty and question
with our hands – in service to others, whether it is easy or hard
and with our being – in the joy of life, and before the mystery of death.

Give us shouts of Hosanna when your blessings lift us high
give us whispers of Hosanna even when we grieve or worry about our future
and give us the memory of Hosanna in our darkest, bleakest moments of silence.

As we enter Holy Week
as we remember not only the entry into Jerusalem
but the betrayal, the denial,
and the cross.

be every kind of praise.

From glad Hosanna
to Father, even if it hurts, thy will not ours be done. Amen.

* * *

Four days after Jesus' Triumphal Entry, he has just finished eating his final supper with his friends. We read Mark 14, verses 32-50.

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.' Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.' All of them deserted him and fled.

Jesus began his ministry on earth with a solitary vigil in the wilderness, but after that, we hardly ever see him alone. He is always in community. He has the Twelve, the disciples whom he chose to be with him, but the gospels also speak of a group of women who are a part of his regular retinue, along with many others. It's yet another reminder of how important it is to be a part of a community of faith. Even Christ needed it.

But some things you simply have to do alone. One of those things is face your own death. And another is trust in God. Sharing a common faith is not enough by itself. A faith that can only stand with a crowd clustered around it, propping it up, is not really faith. Faith has to stand alone, too. This night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus faced his own death, struggled with his own fear, looked for way out, and had to choose between either standing in integrity and dying or running away, he did it alone. First he was alone by choice. Later, when he looked for support from others and found them sleeping, he was alone by default. Either way, alone he made his choice. He was going to trust God, whatever happened. "Yet not what I want, but what you want." Your will, not mine.

Theologian James Fowler talks about "Stages of Faith." That is, there are certain types of faith that tend to be shared among people at the same cognitive and psycho-social levels of development. For instance, adolescents – teenagers – tend to have a fairly emotional faith that clings strongly to group identity. Sort of a high school cafeteria with everyone sitting in their designated cliques. This helps to explain religious youth rallies – highly emotional group experiences. The next stage of faith, which may begin in early adulthood, is when a person

breaks from the group and begins to develop an individual faith – no longer automatically accepting the doctrines and practices of her own group but rather constructing a faith of her own. But here's the thing: not everyone makes that move. In fact, Fowler suggests that most remain safely in the comfortable conformity of an adolescent group-oriented faith. This is partly churches' fault. Churches often encourage their people to stay at the adolescent stage, because in terms of attendance and giving numbers, it's in the church's best interest to keep its members identifying only with *their* group.

Over the past five Sundays, I've talked about "Church Refugees," people who have left church entirely, after years of being involved. And we've talked about some of the reasons they gave for their departure. But at heart, nearly every story I've told comes back to this. These de-churched people began exploring an individual faith, thinking and acting for themselves, but encountered resistance from their churches, which didn't *want* their people going off on their own. So, unable to develop an individual faith within a faith community, the church refugees decided to do it without one.

And so we go back to Gethsemane. In the end, Jesus had to face the crisis of doubt and fear and imminent death all by himself. Ultimately, it's the only way to face such things. People who love you can care for you while you confront the darkness, but they can't do it for you, and they can't make it go away. But when you step out alone before God, that's when you can discover a Gethsemane faith, one founded on the deep trust that God is at work and that the best we can do is say, "not what I want, but what you want." It is at Gethsemane, alone, that we find the courage to face the worst the world can throw at us and still say, as Christ said to his disciples, "Get up. Let us be going."

That helps to explain why Jesus turned his back on the cheering crowds of Palm Sunday, just as it helps to explain why in the garden that night, he left his disciples behind when he went off to pray. Because a faith that cannot stand alone is not enough. As we enter Holy Week, during which we remember the darkness that Our Lord faced and the courage with which he faced it, let us find in him courage to ask our own questions, to voice our own doubts, to seek God wherever God might be found – inside and outside the church. Because the coming sunrise of Easter only makes sense if we've gone through the darkness first.