

THE FOCUS AND THE FAITH
A Palm Sunday Sermon by Thomas R. Henry
St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago
March 28, 2010

Texts: Psalm 118:24-29; Zechariah 9:9-10; Luke 19:28-40

Two year olds are determined. And sometimes single minded. As a grandfather, I have discovered this once again. The sweet little child makes up her mind. She gives you “that look,” and the world had better watch out. So, when the Gospel of Luke says that Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem,” I have some idea of what that means. It means he was going to do what he was going to do! And what he was going to do was to ride into town. He was going to Jerusalem.

Jesus was determined to go into the city that day. I don’t know if he gave his followers that look, but he had focus and he had faith. He was focused on the task and he had faith that God was with him and that this was the right thing to do. To face his accusers and to face his mortal enemies head on. To show the world that intimidation and fear-mongering, and suffering and even death should not keep one from doing the right thing. In a sense Jesus was the living example of the words that Franklin Roosevelt spoke 1900 years later: “The only thing to fear is fear itself.”

Now, some of Jesus’ disciples thought it was not the right thing, but a foolish thing for him to do. A very foolish thing. For they knew, and he knew, what the palm-waving crowd did not know: that this was the beginning of the end. He was headed for heaven on the highway to hell. Yet, much as he might have wanted to, he did not turn the donkey around. And so we are here today because Jesus rode into town.

We are here because of the path he paved for us. And there are days when we find ourselves walking down that very path he paved. Facing known and unknown dangers. Facing uncertain futures. Facing only God knows what. And yet, we don’t go down that path alone. That is the calm assurance of the whole Holy Week saga, from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to Easter and beyond. We don’t go down that path alone.

Jesus rode into that holy week as a single, solitary individual. His inner thoughts were at odds with external expectations. Even the expectations of his disciples. He was cheered on Palm Sunday and then jeered on Good Friday. He was lifted up and then beaten down. Just like many public heroes in our own time. He began the week as one man. But he rose up out of that week no longer as Jesus alone but as the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ on the path to Pentecost and the birth of the Church and on down through the centuries.

A solitary life became a multitude of believers. Kind of a Verizon network of believers and challengers, comforters and healers who surround us yet today. People from the past who are still with us in memory. And people right here with us now. A network of believers who help each of us keep the focus and the faith. We are the Body of Christ because Jesus rode into town.

He began that week very alone even though he was accompanied by his disciples and followed by the crowd.. The crowd that waved palms and shouted hosannas thought he was going their way. That he was on their path. They thought that he was going to overthrow the tyranny of Rome and usher in the reign of the Messiah. His disciples, however, thought he should have stayed in the relatively quiet countryside. Below the radar. They thought he was going the wrong way.

I have told the story before of my most gut-wrenching wrong way experience. It was in Washington D.C. I was driving and in the midst of a lot of heavy traffic, I got confused and actually turned the wrong way onto a busy expressway. Just like on Palm Sunday, there were crowds of people. But they were all in their cars. And they were not shouting, "Hosanna!" And they were not waving palms!

Just talking about this now still gives me an icy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had made a major mistake. Jesus had not. He knew what he was doing. But that does not deny the fact that he, too, might have had an icy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was putting not only his own life but the lives of his followers in danger. He knew what he was doing when he rode into town.

We mostly relate to Jesus as God, but he was also human. That is what makes him God-with-us. Today imagine with me what he must have pondered and prayed about as he rode into Jerusalem, knowing that the people were clueless about his real purpose. We now read the Holy Week story as a story of the betrayal of Jesus, but people then believed that he had betrayed them. That he had gone the wrong way. Yet, they were also fascinated by him. Some of the religious authorities were rightly concerned when they said, "Look the whole world has gone after him." And when, in the midst of that Palm Sunday parade, some of those authorities told Jesus to order the people to be quiet, Jesus said: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout..."

Jesus had the power within. The power of trust and concentration; of faith and focus; of reliance upon the faithfulness of God to work for good in all things for him and with him. I do not believe that Jesus was predestined to do what he did. Definitely he was brought to Palm Sunday by God. Through his very close personal relationship with God; through the earlier decisions he had made in his life; through the experiences he had with people who affected his life; and through his own sense of purpose and calling. But I believe he could have made a last minute change of plans. He could have turned the donkey around.

If he had done that, he would have relieved his immediate anxiety. We all know about how easy it is for us to panic at the last minute and turn back in order to relieve our anxiety about doing something we don't want to do or are afraid to do. Yes, he could have relieved his anxiety and would not have had to sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane later that week. Instead, he chose differently. He had prepared himself way back there in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, when he was tempted by Satan. He had held fast to his beliefs through all the words he had spoken and the work he had done.. On Palm Sunday and on Good Friday, he saw it through to the end.

Jesus made his decision to ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, pretty much knowing what lay ahead, at least as far as Friday. It was in his riding on, and not turning back, that he made the Day of Resurrection possible. He was given Easter and eternal glory by God. He was given Easter. And because of that, we are given Easter. So now we know more than 2000 years later, that we, too, can be of good courage. That we can hold fast to that which is good. That we can return to no one evil for evil. That we can live through it all. Because Jesus rode into town.

Mitch Albom, the author of the bestselling memoir, "Tuesdays with Morrie," has written a little book titled, "have a little faith." It is about Albom's conversations with his rabbi, who is dying, and with an African American pastor who is struggling with a broken down congregation in a broken down church. In one of the conversations they are discussing the existence of God, and the rabbi says, "When you come to the end, that's where God begins."

Jesus was coming to the end as he rode into town that day. He was coming to the end and he was letting God begin. That is the powerful message of Palm Sunday: Jesus' focus and his faith. A focus and a faith that has been carried on, down through the centuries, in the living Body of Christ. Yes, in you and me. In St. Pauls.

He was silenced, but we will sing. Like the stones, we will shout. And when one of us has no voice, others will shout for us. And sing for us.. So that when we feel we are coming to the end, God will begin. God will begin. God incarnate in the multitude of flesh and blood angels that surround us.

When we come to the end, God will begin to do something new. Amen.

BIBLICAL TEXTS FOR THE SERMON

HEBREW SCRIPTURE READINGS

We have three readings for Palm Sunday. The first two are from the Hebrew scriptures and are the historical references for the Palm Sunday story. Specifically, the festival procession, the palm branches, and the donkey. The first reading is from **Psalm 118, verses 24 to 29:**

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

The second reading is from the writing of the Hebrew prophet concerning the coming of the Jewish Messiah: **Zechariah , chapter 9, verses 9 and 10:**

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter 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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be

from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth

GOSPEL READING

The Palm Sunday Gospel reading for this year is from Luke. The other three Gospels, Mark, Matthew and John, all have similar accounts, but each Gospel writer records slightly different details. In the Palm Sunday story, references are made to the Hebrew scriptures, specifically to Zechariah and the Psalms.

Luke 19: 28-40

Then Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."