

COVENANT WORD

When Everybody Knows

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

A message by
Rev. Sarah Jackson Shelton
Pastor
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

My childhood dinner table was robust with conversation and good food. We all knew to take our seat at 6:00 p.m. every night. And while music played in the background, my Victorian grandmother would correct our manners should we be inspired to hum along. So you can imagine my surprise when, one night, my Dad could not be contained. He heard the song "Some Enchanted Evening" from the production of South Pacific, and he not only burst forth with "You may hear her laughter across a crowded room," but he reached over for my mother's hand and sang to her. Their love for one another was something we all knew, but to see it played out in front of our very eyes was different. What was private and "understood," was now very public. Everybody knew!

Those very Broadway recordings were my favorite pieces to select on our Hi-Fi. The hearth of the living room fireplace had a small step that made it a perfect stage, and even better, there was a mirror on the opposite wall so that I could sing and dance while watching. Now my parents never took me for singing or dancing lessons. "The activities at church were all we need to be involved in," they would say. While they never specifically commented, I think I sensed that maybe I just wasn't talented enough and so my performances were private. They were for my own amusement. In fact, sometimes, I closed the living room drapes to insure that no one else could see. But on this particular day, the windows were open. It was too hot to close the drapes. I put a record on and began my routine of singing and dancing.

I am sure that the music was loud; my singing probably even louder, so

that when a neighborhood boy, named Porter Scott, happened to walk through our yard, he heard it all. He was drawn to the window. As I came up from a bow to the imaginary audience, I finally realized that Porter was standing outside of the window, smiling and laughing. My only consolation was that it was summer and maybe Porter would forget what he had witnessed before school started. My worst fear, however, was, if Porter Scott knew my secret heart's desire, then everybody else would know too!

As a student at Southern Seminary, I sat in Bill Leonard's church history class. Loyd Allen was in the front row desk just

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ahead of me. He would often turn around to engage me in conversation before class began. We were both from Alabama, and he was curious about what I would do with a Masters of Divinity; to what did I feel called? I refused to answer. I thought he would respond in ways similar to Porter Scott. Was it his business anyway to know that I felt called to preach? It was still a new idea to me, and I just wasn't ready to tell nor was I ready to argue my position on women standing in the pulpit. But he was persistent. He kept asking and I kept saying "I'm not going to tell you, Loyd, because you will laugh!" The more I refused, the more Loyd asked. So one day, I finally said, "I feel called to preach." Loyd said, "Oh," and turned around.

The very next year, I won the Francisco Preaching Award. The first woman to receive first place in the history of the Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary, it fell to me to preach in Tuesday's high chapel service. Loyd Allen had been on the selection committee and asked if he could introduce me. In front of the entire seminary body, he turned to look at me and said, "Sarah, after today, everybody will know!"

Everybody will know! What is that sweet, tender place in your heart and soul that you try to protect? What feels too crazy to confess? What seems too big to dream? What is in you that you don't want just anybody to know?

It feels a little like a congregation I know and love who is in a discernment process. While we know who we are as accepting and welcoming safely within the context of these walls and on this corner, are we really ready and willing for everybody to know? The irony of our being in a discernment process during the days of Lent has resonated with me many times as we refer to Lent as a journey of identity . . . identity that remains quietly within or identity that bursts forth so that everybody knows. We sometimes call it "the journey to Jerusalem" and it asks the question if we, as believers of Jesus Christ, are willing to go the full distance in order to get to resurrection. William Dols, formerly of Myers Park Baptist Church, puts it like this: (Just Because it Didn't Happen, p. 3)

Jerusalem is the place or person or part of yourself you fear the most – that over the years you have avoided, denied, tried to ignore – worked hard to forget or outgrow or

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get over or leave behind or cast out or sedate or drown or out-run or cover up or camouflage or cure or blame on somebody else. ...[we avoid Jerusalem, because instinctively we know that] when you finally go [to Jerusalem], you die. You die as did Jesus to the illusion of being saved by temple or messiah. You die to fond dreams of a peaceable kingdom in church or marriage or self. You die to answers and quick fixes and

tricks of the trade and pretensions and images and roles and buying yourself off. You die to being the center – calling the shots – being forever in control, becoming perfect – even adequate.

And that kind of dying includes earthquakes and tribulations. Outside Jerusalem you can do lots of fine stuff – fresh starts, new resolves, promises and pledges and good works. But only in Jerusalem will you become re-invented, re-created, transformed.

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Jesus is on this journey to Jerusalem. In the earlier chapters of Mark's gospel, we find that Jesus isn't ready for everybody to know who he is. "The Messianic Secret" is unique to Mark's narrative. We find it when Jesus, at significant junctures of his ministry, will say "I may have just healed you, but don't go telling everybody about it." In essence, he says, "I am not ready for everybody to know this about me, so don't tell." (R. Alan Culpepper, *Smyth and Helwys Commentary: Mark*, pg. 180)

- + In chapter 1, Jesus clearly tells the demons that he exorcises from the citizens in Capernaum, that they are to be silent. (vs. 25) Verse 34 says, "He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." (vs. 34)
- + Further along in chapter one, Jesus tells a cleansed leper, "See that you say nothing to anyone. (1:44)
- + In chapter 5, when Jesus goes into the ruler's house to heal his little girl, Jesus strictly charges those present that no one should know anything about his miracle. (5:43)
- + In chapter 7, Jesus takes aside a man who is deaf and speaks with an impediment. Jesus cures him and then charges those nearby to tell no one. (7:36)
- + In Mark's gospel, when Jesus teaches in parables, he clearly states that he does this in order to conceal the mysteries of the Kingdom of God from outsiders. (4:11-13)

In story after story, Jesus charges the people to be silent, and in nearly every case, they "talk about it freely." The news of his actions spreads so quickly that "Jesus can no longer openly enter a town." Instead, "people come to him from every quar-

ter." (1:45) Most New Testament scholars think that Jesus commanded secrecy because he didn't want to be known merely as a wonder worker. Others believe that the Messianic Secret exists because Jesus is trying to discourage suspicion from the religious and political authorities. I wonder, however, if Jesus is attempting to protect his identity as Messiah because he just isn't ready for everyone to know. Maybe he felt he had some things to prove before taking on the mantle of "Son of God," "Messiah," "King of the Jews." Maybe he personally needed some time to live into such a calling. Being the "Savior of the world" would take some getting used to, don't you think? He didn't want the world to know him as such until he himself is ready to take it on. And that day came when Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem during Passover. (My following thoughts were helped by Shannon Kershner, "We Were There: The Crowd," *Fourth Presbyterian Church*, Chicago, March 29, 2015)

In telling the story, Mark slows the narrative down. For once, there is no immediacy. Mark applies restraint by pausing to tell us that Jesus is engineering the whole scene. Six of the eleven verses that Mark uses to describe Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem are spent focusing on the details of preparation, and it would appear that Jesus has done his homework to direct the disciples to each item necessary to set the stage for his coming into the city for his coming out to the world.

Mark does not name the disciples chosen for donkey detail, but remember that in just a few verses prior, the disciples argue over who is the greatest. They jockey for positions of privilege on the left and on the right hand side. So it is deliciously ironic that on this very public and glorious day of being associated with Jesus, that the disciples find themselves engaged in a most unromantic form of ministry. Looking suspiciously like horse thieves, they muck around a stable trying to wrestle an untamed beast. With prominent eye rolling, don't you know they asked themselves, "For this, we left our fishing nets?" (Thomas Long, *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, "Donkey Fetchers")

With donkey collected, Jesus stages his parade. In *Feasting on the Gospels*, Wolfgang Stahlberg says

that what Jesus is doing is akin to the Occupy protest movements from several years ago. Rather than a triumphal entry, it feels more like an "Occupy Jerusalem" with protesters camped out to be purposefully provocative. It seems that Jesus is staging his parade in direct contrast to the parade happening on the opposite side of Jerusalem.

For you see, entering Jerusalem from the western side of the city is an imperial parade meant to impress. The Romans didn't want any Jews to believe that Passover would really be their holiday. You remember Passover: the religious festival that celebrates the Jewish people's liberation from Egyptian oppressors. The faithful, therefore, make a point to be in Jerusalem for Passover. The city is bustling with throngs of fervently religious pilgrims. So in a proactive move, the Romans powerful presence was strategically employed to be sure anybody's misbegotten idea that liberation might occur **again** will be squashed immediately. At every

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Solemn crowds gather along the roadside to watch as the imperial cavalry and soldiers march into Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, leads the way on his war horse. It was impressive, really, like Cecil B.

Demille impressive: big strong horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, gleaming helmets, weapons, banners and golden eagles mounted on poles. Drums beat a cadence to keep the marching rhythmic. (*The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan) There is no mistake about who was in control. There is no mistake about who has the power.

It happened the same way every year, so Jesus did know what was coming into the city from the West as he came in from the East. On Jesus' side, however, there is no sound of cracking leather or clinking bridles. There is no military formation; no sense of intimidation; no display of power. Rather than a weapon of war, Jesus rides an agricultural tool. He rides a tractor and not a tank. (Samuel Wells, *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2005, "Who is He Kidding?") With his feet almost dragging the ground, his ride into Jerusalem is comical by comparison. But it does do what he had hoped. It brings to mind the prophet

Zechariah (9:9):

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 an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass.

With hope, the people join in the pageantry. They wave their branches! They spread their cloaks to create a sort of red carpet, and they shout, "Hosanna!" which means, "Save us! Please, Jesus, save us now!"

Save us from the violence that stalks our schools and neighborhoods!

Save us from the empty promises of moving beyond political partisanship to meaningful cooperation!

Save us from the grief of burying our loved ones struck down by cancer or HIV AIDS or opioids!

Save us from the pervasive power of racism!

Save us, please Jesus, save us from ourselves!

And with every "Hosanna," the reality of the loving presence in Jesus is revealed so that everybody now knows who he is: Messiah! God's only Son! To squelch his popularity, to silence his voice, to kink up his loving plans, those with power know they must kill him. The threatened Romans and the insulted religious leadership pair up to take him to the cross; which is where we all end up when everybody knows we are agents of change; when everybody knows we are working for peace; when everybody knows we love Jesus with all of who we are and, therefore, love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

I imagine that in that protest parade moment, with all the energy and excitement in the air and the sounds of playful joy all around, that Jesus allowed everybody to know who he is . . . who God calls him to be . . . God with us, God for us . . . even when this knowledge will lead him straight to his death on the cross. Everybody knows . . . the disciples know . . . the crowds know . . . the Romans know . . . the religious authorities know who Jesus is, but no one knew exactly what was coming next until their intolerance and fear and insecurity meet and a plan emerges as the crowds move from "hosanna!" to "crucify him!"

Ohhhh, the ride into Jerusalem seals the deal. It is

confirmation that Jesus is not about identifying with those in splendor but instead identifies with those who suffer; Jesus is not interested in power, but with vulnerability and humility; Jesus is determined. The prophet says he sets his jaw like flint towards Jerusalem in order that everybody will know him to be the God who is with us . . . the God who saves us. Instead of standing on the sidelines with palms in hand, may we join in this parade of identity. Let us walk into Jerusalem to courageously claim the love of Jesus Christ, and if everybody knows, who cares, because the love of Christ is for everybody. So let us kneel before others to wash their feet knowing that the God who loves us is also the God who saves us. So Hosanna! God save us! Hosanna in the name of the Lord, Amen.