

PALM SUNDAY
March 25, 2018

Text: Mark 11:1-11

Theme: Jerusalem

The question most asked prior to our trip overseas was:

Do you really think it is safe to travel to Israel?

And the question most asked after our return was:

Were you ever afraid while you were there?

We did our homework. We checked with people *in the know* who offered their opinions about the overall safety of Israel. We choose tours that did not include buses or large groups of people. We choose not to see some sites because of their locations. We registered with the State Department so we would receive any alerts while traveling. And when we boarded the plane that would take us to Istanbul (and then to Tel Aviv), we understood the risks.

Did we feel safe in Israel? Yes! Our suitcases and bags have never been checked as many times as when we entered and left our country and our final destination. In the marketplaces throughout Jerusalem we grew accustomed to the three or four armed police standing guard with their hands securely placed on their weapons. When we traveled to the Sea of Galilee there were numerous checkpoints. And all along the way we could see the wall of the West Bank with the barbed wire lacing the wall on top and the towers rising above the walls with more guards on duty. Israel does everything within its power to make its country secure and for our part we did everything within our power to remain inconspicuous.

Most of us will instinctively make ourselves less visible when danger is near but that is certainly not how we experience Jesus as he makes his way into Jerusalem.

Why does he decide to ride into the city in such a way that it draws attention? Why (at this point in his ministry) does he make a triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the stronghold of his enemies?

It does not make any sense. Jesus knew full well what would happen to him in Jerusalem so why place such a large target on his own back?

When we remove all the pomp and circumstance of this day we are left with a confusing story. On three different occasions he told his disciples the not-so-good news of how he would be rejected, delivered into the hands of his enemies, condemned to death, and then would rise again. Especially in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus always cautioned his disciples to say nothing about what they had seen or heard him do. But now, just days before the Passover, Jesus decides to ride into Jerusalem in full sight – to receive the acclaim of the crowds and to make a grand appearance before the world.

When we read the rest of the gospel (the passion narrative) let it be sufficient to say that Jesus knew this was the opportune time to make himself known to his believers and to those who would participate in his suffering and death. I like to think of it as his *kairos* moment. He was in the right place at the right time to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies and to be obedient to the will of God. Now was the time for the world to know that he was indeed the Son of God (today in all of his glory) (and by the end of the week even in his humiliation). No longer will his presence remain hidden.

Every year this is the Sunday that pastors make their passionate plea for everyone to attend worship for all of the Holy Week experiences (as you are able) because to know God (our quest this Lenten season) we have to take this walk with Christ. We cannot stop at the gates of Jerusalem and hide the rest of the week until it is time to visit the empty tomb. This week is about our own *kairos* moments. It puts us in the right place and the right time to fully appreciate what God has done through Christ.

But first we need to clear our schedules and take the time to open our Bibles. And I tested it out. If we read Mark 11-15 one chapter a day from Monday through Friday, it coincides perfectly with the Holy Week experience. It prepares us for the worship services on Maundy Thursday and again on Good Friday. It will lead us on the walk Deacon Erin and I have planned for this coming Saturday at 9:00 am. We will travel throughout our community using the *Stations of the Cross* as our guide. All of these things will point us to Easter.

Yes – it is a long list of things to do in one week but Palm Sunday was not meant to be the only stop before Easter. Jesus first leads us to the Upper Room and then he takes us to Golgotha.

And for those of us who are squeamish, I promise that the confidence by which Jesus entered Jerusalem will sustain us in his suffering and death. We may never understand why God chose this way for us to be saved but only when we experience the whole passion narrative do we feel the love that God has for us. It is a love that will withstand the horror of the crucifixion. It is a love that will last beyond eternity.

Obviously our trip to Israel preceded the festivities of Holy Week but already the city was swelling with crowds gathering to make their pilgrimage. Today, in the city of Jerusalem, people will be waving palms and olive branches. The locals will be in colorful uniforms, playing the bagpipes and beating their drums with great enthusiasm. Their walk will start early in the morning and will end with a Solemn Mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Later in the afternoon, more than a thousand Christians will gather at Bethphage for another procession of palms that goes down the Mount of Olives, alongside the Garden of Gethsemane, down into the Kidron Valley and back up and through the Lion's Gate. They will enter the Old City where another mass will be held, this time at St. Anne's Church (where Jesus was said to have healed the paralytic). Groups from all nations will display their flags and they will sing songs as guitars and drums accompany them.

And on Friday when the Christians carry the cross through the streets of Jerusalem, the Jewish community will sit around their family tables to celebrate the Passover. They will rid their homes of all bread and food containing leaven (symbolizing pride and sin) and for the next seven days they will eat matzah to symbolize the humility necessary for redemption.

It is no coincidence that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples within the context of the Passover. On that night he washed their feet as a sign of his own humility. He then got up and returned to Gethsemane to be betrayed, arrested, and handed over to the Romans. It was necessary for our redemption.

Palm Sunday is intimately tied to the rest of this week. Only when we put all of these events together do we learn why Jesus rode into Jerusalem in such a public way.

His ministry was no longer to be a secret. It was the right time for his purpose to be revealed. It was the right time to understand that no matter how difficult the coming days would be ... the death and resurrection of our Lord was drawing near.

When Jesus boldly entered Jerusalem he proclaimed the truth of who he was and he bore witness to a love that could not be broken. He saw beyond his own safety and became fully obedient to the will of God. And for that reason alone we give honor and glory to Christ this day. We worship the one who let nothing destroy the love his Father had for his people. Amen