

“He Went On Ahead”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Palm Sunday – March 24, 2013

**Luke 19: 28-40**

“And after he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.”

For ten chapters, Luke tells a story. It is a story of grace. It is a story of challenge. It is a story of persistence. It is the story of Jesus “setting his face to go to Jerusalem.” Since the ninth chapter, everything Jesus has done has been with the intent of “going to Jerusalem.” That’s nearly half the gospel. And now, as a way to bring that point home, Luke begins the Palm Sunday narrative by telling us that initial story is at an end.

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The details are familiar. A command to find a donkey. An owner asking why the men were taking his animal. Cloaks on the colt, cloaks on the road. Palm branches waving in the air. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Every year we recount the details. Every year we remember the story. Each year we begin this holiest of weeks with these very familiar details.

Craig Barnes comments on the details of Luke’s Palm Sunday account: *Notice how Luke describes Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. We are given the exact location: the Jerusalem suburbs of Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives. Jesus then pulls two of his disciples aside, “Go into the village and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.” Jesus has clearly spent time preparing for this day. He knows exactly what type of colt he wants – one that had never been ridden. He knows exactly where the colt is. He’s even worked out a response to the public relations problem of swiping a colt. “If anyone asks you . . . just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’”*

*Why is Jesus such a perfectionist? Why doesn’t he just ask his disciples to find him a ride into town? Because Jesus is fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy of the long-awaited Messiah. “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” (Zech. 9:9). Jesus is determined to get his arrival into town exactly right. And Luke is determined that we know every detail of the arrival of our new king.*

*We tend to think that spirituality means escaping the concern with detail. Spiritual people, we think, live simple lives. They don’t worry about mortgages and dentist appointments and going to church*

*committee meetings. They wear sandals, meditate and feed the birds. But that is not the biblical understanding of spirituality. According to the Bible, the obstacle to our spirituality is not that we pay attention to the details of life, but that we pay too much attention to the wrong details* (Craig Barnes, "It's in the Details," *Christian Century*, March 23, 2004: 17).

Which details do we pay most attention to? Where we live? How much we earn? Which trip we will take next? When we will get married, have children, and live "happily ever after?"

Or are they the details which shift our focus inward out of fear and anxiety? How long we will have our loved ones with us? How long we will live ourselves? What bad thing will happen to us next, and how can we prevent it from happening?

It's the "wrong details" which shift our focus away from the one who comes in the name of the Lord. For it is that one who comes that calls us to details of praise, thanksgiving, and faith.

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What was Jesus heading into? Was it truly a day for rejoicing? Or was it more complicated than just praise and thanksgiving?

William Carter is a pastor, and he writes: *For all its joyful hosannas, Palm Sunday is a day of contrasts. We hear it in the hymns, pivoting as they do between happy triumph and inevitable crucifixion. We see it in Jesus, as the ruler of the universe chooses to ride a borrowed colt. The contrast is clear in the destination, as the city that welcomes him will later scream for his blood. For now, at least, the greatest hopes for peace are hidden from those who wish for it.*

*We have our own contradictions, of course. Someone tells us the best way to create peace is by initiating a war. The strong are strengthened by holding off the weak. Schools encourage competition over cooperation. Governments and businesses seek to win at all costs, even if it bankrupts them. Jesus rides his lowly farm animal through all of it.*

*Jesus rides no high horse, just a lowly colt. He chooses to enter a deadly situation without force or protection. He gives himself freely and without reservation. This is a prophetic act, a sign of God's vulnerable love, which risks everything and promises to gain all. This is the means by which God creates peace.*

*Halfway down the Mount of Olives, there is a small chapel in the shape of a teardrop. It is called Dominus Flevit (Latin for "the Lord weeps"). It is the traditional location where Jesus wept over the city. Pilgrims gather there to share the Eucharist as they move toward Jerusalem. As they view a city still divided, with people of different faiths squabbling over the same real estate, they pass the bread to the words, "This is my body, broken for you." Then they share the cup of wine, saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood, shed for the*

*forgiveness of sins.” It is a moment to recall the great cost of reconciliation, as God sent Jesus into the world to bring all back to God’s powerful love (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009).*

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Jesus knew what awaited him: pain, sacrifice, death. He knew what was on ahead, up at Jerusalem. He was the Son of God, but he also was like us, our human brother. He could have just as easily chosen to turn around, spare himself the pain he knew was coming, and go the other way. But he didn’t. He chose to go on ahead.

As Christians, this simple phrase – “he went on ahead” – should give us incredible strength and courage to face the challenges of our life. When we are tempted to choose the easier path, our Savior took the harder path on our behalf. When we focus on the details which turn our attention inward, our Savior focused on the details which fulfilled the prophets’ call that he comes in the name of the Lord. When we feel like stepping back, giving up, and retreating, we remember that our Savior looked back on all that had happened before this Holy Week, and chose to go on ahead. How we respond to the challenges of life says a great deal about how much strength we draw from the one who went on ahead.

I was with my grandmother, Ruth Mansell, last Sunday. She is 102 years old, and is slowly regaining her strength after an illness earlier this year. She struggles with her sight and her hearing, but her mind is as clear as day. After all she has seen and been through, if there ever was someone who could take a break from the routines of life, she certainly would qualify. Church, correspondence, keeping in touch with others – it would be very understandable for her to simply take the easy path and stop these activities.

Those thoughts went through my head last Sunday as all of us sat in her small assisted living apartment and worshipped with a Methodist congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, through its television ministry. Despite her disabilities, she is compelled to worship God however she can, and she is fed spiritually through this and other personal daily devotions. I couldn’t help but think how many times I have sought to take the easy path, forgetting the challenging path my Savior took this week. My grandmother reminded me this week how to live every day – every day – in thanksgiving for the one who went on ahead, never taking for granted what God has done for us in this holiest of weeks.

Thanks be to God for the one who went on ahead. Amen.