

“Faith in the Journey”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Palm Sunday – March 20, 2016

Luke 19: 28-40

One of the things that I will always be amazed at by this book (hold up a bible) is that no matter how many times I read it, I am continually learning new things. When we come to familiar stories and celebrations in the church’s life, such as today with Palm Sunday, it is easy to assume that we know everything that happens, that there is nothing new for us to hear. And to be honest, I often feel that way when I’m first looking at a familiar text like today’s from the Gospel of Luke. “Jesus comes in to Jerusalem on a donkey, people wave palm branches, shout, ‘Hosanna!’ Got it – let’s move on.”

Except, as is usually the case, God has a different plan for me. Something’s missing from Luke’s account of this day. Did you catch it? Anyone? It’s the item that identifies what today is: palms. Nowhere in Luke’s account of Palm Sunday are palm branches mentioned. I never realized that!

MaryAnn McKibben Dana writes: *I run a number of races each year, many of which begin in the chill of early morning. Event organizers encourage people to wear old clothing over their race clothes while they’re waiting for the gun to go off; anything cast off along the course is donated to a local charity . . .*

I always think about the streets of Jerusalem, littered not with runners’ secondhand clothing but with the cloaks of everyday people, come to see Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, there’s nary a palm in sight; people spread cloaks on the road instead. When this text comes around in the lectionary, my friends and I make preacher jokes about celebrating Cloak Sunday.

There’s no evidence the people knew Jesus was coming and were waiting for their chance to disrobe for the Messiah. If there were, it would take something away from the reckless abandon of the gesture – these are not carefully considered cast-offs. Jesus is a different kind of messiah than people were expecting. He comes riding on a donkey, not a mighty war horse. His crown will be made of thorns, not jewels. His kingdom is marked by justice, not opulence (*Christian Century*, March 2, 2016: 19).

Palm Sunday has always been a day of stark contrasts for me. We have the crowd’s desire and expectation of a conquering king; and yet this king is so humble he rides in on a donkey. We have the long-awaited Messiah, whom the people had always heard would come and save them from their oppressors; and yet this Messiah simply receives their adoration without ego, and would eventually “save them” by dying on a cross. We have the shouts of the crowds this day, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” and we hear echoes of Luke’s earlier account of the angels announcing this man’s birth in Bethlehem.

The contrasts for us today are real, as well. As human beings, we long for leaders to take away our problems, and their rhetoric can induce us into thinking they will be our savior. Yet that is often in stark contrast to what we truly need: our own accountability to not only improve our own lives, but also to improve the lives of our neighbor. The crowds wanted an easy fix to alleviate all their problems, and they thought a conquering hero was their answer. Many times we feel that if we just get the right person in leadership, all our problems will go away. And yet, as we see today, God's power acts in a much different and revolutionary way, not to overpower others, but to reconcile, transform, and renew the world through the greatest act of love imaginable.

There's another contrast that MaryAnn McKibben Dana points out: *Jesus doesn't lead the throng into Jerusalem, riding out front with everyone trailing behind him. Perhaps he's in the middle of a crowd of admirers. But from the way Luke tells the story, it seems like he's bringing up the rear. How can you throw your cloak on the road for Jesus unless you're ahead of him?*

Jesus' ministry has been punctuated by his invitation to "come, follow me." And many do follow, swept along in the wake of the one who will preach, teach, heal, exorcise, exasperate, and inspire. But here, as his ministry approaches its culmination, it's the disciples and the crowd who are out ahead, and he's the one following.

Sometimes we follow Jesus from behind. We can see him clearly; we know we're on the right path. But sometimes Jesus is in our rearview mirror, gesturing at us to go. It takes faith to follow Jesus. It takes very deep faith to go ahead of him into unknown territory. For this moment, at least, the crowd exemplifies what Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction" – a discipleship that's oriented toward the reign of God, even when Jesus isn't out front showing the way (ibid).

How do we seek to gain "a long obedience in the same direction" of our Messiah and Lord? How do we seek to have very deep faith to both follow our Lord and to go into an unknown land ahead of him? Many times, we don't want to commit to something unless all of our fears are alleviated, or all of our questions are answered. But calling ourselves disciples of the one who comes in the name of the Lord is not solely a safe, pain-free faith. It often involves risk, requires sacrifice, and the ultimate outcome is never assured. Sometimes, all we can do is have faith in the journey.

It would be nice to know that our loved one's illness will be healed, that he or she will return to wholeness, that life will go back to the way it was. But for the family with a loved one lying in a hospital bed, there are no such assurances. It is an unknown territory full of anxiety. So they profess their faith in the journey ahead, knowing that their Lord is coming.

It would be nice to know that our family's future will be secure, that whatever stresses we are experiencing will eventually be replaced with happiness and fulfillment. But for the husband and wife struggling in their marriage, for the teenager struggling with his or her self-worth, for the elderly

parent feeling lost without their spouse – there are no such assurances. It is an unknown territory filled with uncertainty. So they profess their faith in the journey ahead, knowing that their Lord is coming.

It would be nice to know that a friend's addiction could end, that he or she could put down that drink for good, or stop abusing those pills. It would be great to believe that relationships could be healed, that debts could be repaid, that life could be happy again. But for those whose loved ones are addicts, there are no such assurances. They can choose to live in denial, but that denial will not erase the pain, the heartache, the brokenness. The future is an unknown territory full of questions. So they profess their faith in the journey ahead, knowing that their Lord is coming.

It would be nice to know that the church's future is assured, that we could revisit all the strategies and programs from the past and recreate the high participation rates of 20, 30, 50 years earlier. It would be great to make a decision today that we know is assured of success tomorrow, and be able to consistently replicate such a model for future security and stability. But for congregations today, we do not have a crystal ball at our disposal. The circumstances in which we find ourselves today are light years' different than they were 10 years ago, much less 30 years ago. The future is an unknown territory filled with change. So we profess our faith in the journey ahead, knowing that our Savior is coming.

Sometimes we follow Jesus from behind. And sometimes, we follow Jesus by venturing into unknown territories, trusting that he is coming up behind us. In those times, sometimes all we can do is trust in the moment, have faith in the journey, and believe that God's love for us is real and will give us the strength we need to get to the next moment, the next time, the next unknown territory.

Because what gives us hope, what gives us strength, what gives us faith in those times is that the one who came in God's name did not stay behind. The one who came in God's name did not withdraw and seek the easy road.

Instead, the one who came in the name of the Lord, "went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." His faith in the journey gives us faith along our journeys. And for that, we are eternally grateful.

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Alleluia! Amen.