

Palm Sunday
The Way Down Is the Way Through
Philippians 2:5-11

Our Palm Sunday procession this morning was beautiful, wasn't it? That re-enactment is a ritual of the Easter season; it leads us into Holy Week every year. It may remind you of your childhood. We put on our best for it: well-behaved and well-rehearsed children, our dignified choir, looking pretty smashing carrying palms! I have a friend, also a pastor, who came as close as she ever got to getting kicked out of her church when she let a live donkey participate in the Palm Sunday procession—with predictably disastrous results on the sanctuary carpeting.

Maybe because we work so hard at the beauty of this ritual, it's hard for us to imagine what the crowd must have felt like on that first Palm Sunday morning. I doubt it was orderly and dignified. Almost certainly it was more like a messy protest march. People milling around, talking, laughing, maybe shouting. Waiting for something to happen. What? They weren't sure; they only knew that Jesus was coming into the city, and it felt like something was about to change. This Jesus was a man whose reputation for charisma and boldness had begun to spread.

Even people who had never heard him speak knew stories—about how he had made blind people see; about people who hadn't walked for years getting up and carrying their own sleeping bags away from where they'd laid on the ground day after day. Hundreds—no, thousands—of people had been offered bread and fish (not just a little, but a lot!) when they were hungry. Stories were told about how he had dared to challenge laws that had been on the books forever. He argued with religious *experts* about whether their traditions still made sense.

Who was this? What was he about to do next? He could do anything he wanted to, probably! And so the people gathered—happy and excited, but also a little nervous, watchful.

It's pretty clear that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday was not a casual happenstance. Even if it looked messy, at least parts of it were deliberately planned. Remember that Israel was an occupied territory; the Roman government kept a tight rein over the Jewish people because they were afraid—justifiably--that if they let up, there would be a political uprising. And so, as the Passover holiday was about to begin—every year—an imperial procession—a military parade--approached Jerusalem, to enter by the west gate of the city. It was intended to remind the occupied subjects of who was in charge: the Roman army. They rode into this colonized city on mighty horses that had come back from battle. They had their swords drawn for emphasis. They would have expected the common people—colonized subjects of the Emperor—to line the streets and watch this display of power with awe and intimidation.

But on this day, the common people were on the other side of the city, where another procession entered, from the east. It was led not by generals in military uniforms, but by Jesus, who looked pretty much like the regular people who had gathered to meet him. And he rode not on a steed, but on a donkey—the cheapest form of transportation available in those days. It would be like a

parade today led by a 1991 Toyota Corolla. The contrast was startling. You would notice it immediately.

And its purpose was baldly political. This procession planned by Jesus and his followers was a direct challenge to the imperial Roman army. It was designed to look like a counter-demonstration, and it hit its mark. The people who lined the streets knew. They were probably a lot like the crowds that gathered in the streets of Tehran in 2009, or in South Africa 20 years ago, or Tiananmen Square a few years before that. These people waved palm branches, which is what subjects of the Empire did when the emperor passed—only they waved them at Jesus. In the path of the donkey, they laid their cloaks on the ground, which is what the lower classes were required to do to keep the aristocracy from having to step in mud that ran in the streets. They knew they were doing something rebellious, a little dangerous.

And this procession of paupers made the point it was intended to make. That the Roman Emperor—who commanded his subjects to refer to him as Savior, and even Son of God, was not the only one who had claim to those titles. The people got it. They thought they were conspiring in the beginning of a revolution. If it kept gathering strength; if this Jesus was as smart as he seemed; if he could gather this kind of crowd and inspire them, as he seemed to be able to do...they just might be able to do it this time. They might actually push the Roman army out of their city. Their country.

This was the hope that was fed on that Palm Sunday. Jesus was their charismatic leader, the one who might rally the people and lead the Jews into the kind of revolution they'd been waiting for for a long time. Maybe he actually *was* the Messiah people said he was. They'd follow him. I know! one person said. Let's make *him* our new king! And the message spread through the crowd...whispered, then shouted.

But there was much they didn't yet understand about their candidate for king. They hadn't listened carefully enough to hear what was at the core of this Jesus. When the parade ended and he started to speak, and to act, this week that began with what looked like a triumphant build-up of momentum started to shift. What had looked like a mass movement of civil and political rights suddenly began to go south on them. The candidate wasn't cooperating in their victory plan.

He seemed to have a different agenda. An agenda that looked like it was more about downward mobility than about maximizing a political candidate's personal potential.

By Monday, it was like he threw the campaign into reverse gear. He seemed intent on turning his back on all the celebrity that crowd was ready to grant him—power that he really could have leveraged into something! Instead of using it to his advantage, he seemed to squander it. He argued with the people whose business of changing money in the Temple had been going for the last 100 years. He dumped their tables over and shout at them about not using God's house for good purposes. Not a good idea if you want to make people like you. He seemed bent on walking away from the acts that would have advanced his reputation, raised his public profile. Instead he seemed to walk willingly toward his own disgrace...and then, even more alarmingly, toward his own death. He seemed to be giving away--emptying himself--of power.

That's what Holy Week is about. Watching Jesus let go of all the prestige and power and privilege he could so easily have taken advantage of, and instead begin the slow and painful walk that would lead to his death at the end of the week.

Why? Why is *this* the story of Jesus Christ, the story that is at the center of the tradition that bears his name and that has imprinted his followers ever since?

Because Jesus knew something about God that no one else knew, something that we who follow him are always just beginning to figure out for ourselves. Jesus knew that the God he spoke for does not rule from a throne like an emperor; he never has. This is a God who is at home and at purpose not on a throne, but with people, inside the reality of human life.

That reality is not always pretty or gentle or proud. In fact, *most of the time* it's not. I read a fascinating article this last week about Monica Lewinsky—remember her? The White House intern whose silly passion or ambition, or something, helped humiliate a president and distract a whole country from its work. Now, more than fifteen years later, Lewinsky is out talking publicly to young people—not about the unfairness of the political process, but about her own shame, how it feels to be famous for the stupidest thing you ever did, when you were just twenty-two.

We may not be as notoriously disgraced as Monica Lewinsky, but I think most of us know something about shame. It seems like there is always something right in front of us to remind us of how flawed life is, how imperfect we are. We are so sure that our work is to rise above those things, muscle up, take control, fix.

The story of this Holy Week in front of us is the story of Jesus living out what he had been trying to say all along: that the path to God, to life, to all the things that matter most, heads not up, burying our imperfection, but down into it. That the way to take care of your life is not to seek your own victories, but to treasure connection. That wholeness comes when you see and touch, and get your hands right into the middle of, the parts of life that you have run so hard to avoid.

You don't have to create the things that will humble you; life will do that for you, no doubt. You just have to learn—probably over and over again—that your work is not to lift yourself up out of the muck of everyday life, but to go deeper into it, to find the seed of grace—the possibility of new life—that hiding there, buried in the mud.

This was truth not just for Jesus, but for each of us. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, Paul wrote to the Philippians in the words we read this morning. Have the same mind, the same heart, the same humility as this one who could have pronounced himself God but emptied himself instead. The one who never forgot that he came from a God who was willing to put aside everything about himself that was divine, to live fully the human experience—your life, mine. Including the fear of death. Including death itself. The God who could have remained sovereign—in charge of everything—chose instead to give it all up so that he could show us what it looks like not to be afraid of *whatever* your life brings you. Make this the pattern for your life too, Paul said.

I'm not sure I can do that. I'm still too unsure of who I am. My ego still needs validation of my own value, my worthiness. But this is the week to watch and to follow someone who has done it. This is the week we can follow Jesus all the way through the story, down and then up—through humiliation and even death--to the story's joyful end in Easter.

If you just skip ahead to next week's triumphant Easter Sunday, without going through the events between here and there, it's easy to miss the point of this story. But don't. This year, let's not miss it.