

Sermon XXII. 10.
Passion / Palm Sunday
24 March 2024

Serving God Faithfully Together

Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 11:1-11a

"...He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross."
Philippians 2:8 (NRSV)¹

I

Year after year, there may be a question that comes to us on this day of "palms" and Passion. It is not really a question of "how" Jesus came... For on this point the (four) gospels more or less agree.

Jesus entered Jerusalem...likely from the Mount of Olives
- near Bethany;

The disciples are with him;

Jesus rides in on the back of a young animal...a colt or a donkey;

Palms or "leafy branches" may have been placed before him - along with garments - as an expression of honor;

And a song of praise and deliverance - including the familiar Hebrew word - "hosanna" - *save, I pray* - was lifted up or shouted by those who welcomed him.

The "how" Jesus came into the city is more or less known to us...even as we come here to hear the story, once more each year.

It's not really a question of "how" Jesus came to Jerusalem...is it?...but "**Why?**"

That's a much **harder** question for any of us to reckon with, I suppose.

Some, well-meaning souls might say, "he *had* no choice." Jesus knew full well **why** he needed to come there... His purpose was divinely given.

And that *is* true, to some extent. The way the gospels present him, Jesus **did** seem to know that Jerusalem awaited him at the end... And with his arrival there, the divine Passion (or "suffering") he shared for the world would unfold - tragically for him.

But, of course, in another way, Jesus had *every* choice before him...including the very real option not to go to the place where rejection, suffering and death likely would be his fate.

On the evening of April 3rd, fifty-six years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis, Tennessee, lending his support to a strike by the city's sanitation workers. And on the night before his death, he spoke to an assembly there at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple... An address in which, Dr. King may have sensed that the end of his time was near... His words, I am sure, you have heard before:

"I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life - longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land.

I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."²

Jesus - like Dr. King - had a choice as to what to do... just as we have a choice.

We may all be aware of those times in our lives when we sense - down deep within ourselves - what we *know* we ought to do. But knowing (what to do) and actually doing it, do not always follow the same course.

Jesus had every choice - not to go to Jerusalem - and yet, he did.

II

Which returns us to that question of "Why?" And perhaps the best answer the church may offer - which faithful people (from Paul, the Apostle...to Karl Barth, the theologian) have pondered (for generations) is this... Jesus, the Son of God, came and died for our sake - and the sake of the entire world.

He came to save us - not a term all Presbyterians may *like* to use in terms of faith - But that is what he did. It's what the people were shouting to him by crying "hosanna" as he made his way into Jerusalem. It's what his common name, Jesus - "the Lord is salvation" - or "savior," actually means.

Through love and obedience he came to show us what lengths God would go to, to deliver us from evil...

the evil of our world...

the wrong that is within us...

the sins we commit against untold numbers...

including our God.

How Jesus accomplished that salvation for all people of the world...remains a matter of faith. I cannot prove it to you. For our faith tells us that Jesus died as a divine-human person who was "without sin." And that, quite simply, is a matter for you to decide.

But, the outcome of your decision - your **discernment**, does not change the **reality** of what Christ did. Discernment means...(among other things)

"the quality of (understanding) that which is hidden or obscure."³

Without fully understanding the doctrine of atonement, we may (at least) be able to acknowledge how we are lifted in spirit by those self-less acts of love that we see demonstrated in others...

I once read the story of a woman and her small daughter. They were trapped in the rubble of a terrible earthquake - that struck Armenia - years ago. For a week - in bitter cold and darkness - they huddled together in a tiny space between slabs of concrete and debris.

But the daughter was dying from the lack of water.

In desperation, the mother found a piece of broken glass and cut her finger. She urged the little girl to suck her bleeding finger, the only liquid she had to keep her daughter alive...

"Please Mama," begged the little girl,
"cut another finger for me."

Fortunately, a few days later the little girl and her mother were rescued. Undoubtedly, the little girl would not have been spared without the self-sacrificial act of her mother.⁴

Jesus Christ came to save us. He came...because we needed him to come.

And that, of course, is what he continues to do.

III

Yet, with God's help - and by God's grace - there is a place for us in this covenant God has shown. As those whom God has made...and redeemed...**We are called to serve.** We serve God... That, in part, is what we are doing now. But we serve God also through *the help we give* and offer to others.

We serve...when we offer **assistance** for those in need

We serve...when we **give blood**...and share through
"One Great Hour."

We serve...when we **pray** for others and give
comfort for those in need of care.

Jesus himself has shown us by example..."taking the form of a slave..." (as Paul says). By freely giving of himself...so that we might live...so that we might follow and serve...so that even when we die - as he died - we might share that life eternal in him.

The Church of Jesus Christ - Presbyterian and otherwise - continues to face the challenges of being **just** and **faithful** in our witness and service to God. As always, there may be some difficult days ahead for us.

But as we seek to serve God faithfully together... may we know...may we remember...we serve - not only the one God of all creation... We serve and follow the Christ of God - who has come down to us - and is with us still.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

W. Clay Macaulay
Director of Alumni Development
Union Presbyterian Seminary
Richmond - Charlotte

A sermon preached for the
Second Presbyterian Church
Petersburg, Virginia

Endnotes

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² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from his final address at Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968, in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1998), p. 365.

³ "Discernment," *Webster's Third New International Dictionary - Unabridged*, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1966), I, 644.

⁴ A story related by Dr. Michael Quicke, in the London *Sunday Times* (no date given), in William H. Willimon, "God Is Coming," *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 31, no. 2 (April, May, June 2003, Year B), pp. 11-12.