

"If We'd Only Known"

Psalm 118:14-24; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Mark was startled when his older brother ran into their little shop. *"Come on! Come on! Where is father?"* Mark spun around, laughing. *"Father has gone to get oil for the lamps. What are you so excited about?"*

"Jesus is coming into the city. Don't you want to see him?" Mark stopped in his tracks and felt his mouth go dry. His father had talked about Jesus for days, especially after he took some bread one day and walked out into the hills to hear Jesus speak. He told Mark that he was thrilled with the message of Jesus but worried that Jesus might be in danger.

Now people were walking quickly past the little shop. Mark could feel excitement in the air. He wondered for a moment if he should wait for father to return, then pulled the little door of the shop tightly closed and joined his brother in the crowd. He could hear shouting in the distance. *"Hosanna! O, save us!"* Would Jesus speak to the people? If there was trouble, would Jesus' friends protect him?

Suddenly the crowds parted and Mark saw a small donkey. Jesus was riding on a donkey and the people were smiling and waving, clapping and singing. A few stepped forward and placed their coats on the stones of the street. *"God bless the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"* the people shouted. *"Peace in heaven and glory to God!"* Mark leaned back into the crowd as Jesus drew near, afraid he might be trampled yet wanting with all his heart to get closer. He tripped and almost fell, and when he looked up, it felt as though Jesus' eyes were on him alone. Maybe they truly were. Mark stared at Jesus. What a mixture of joy and sadness he saw in that face.

Mark's own excitement was somehow muted. Where was Jesus headed? What would become of him?

Palm Sunday represents human victory and our notions of what victory is. The waving palms, the shouts of the crowd, the swell of popular adoration: these are the marks of human victory. The victory contains all the glory of a coronation: pomp and circumstance and music. These are not so far from our experience as we think of Presidential inaugurations; the conferring of academic degrees; and the ordination of clergy.

The victory of Palm Sunday also contains the imagined triumph of partisanship. The people of Israel and Jerusalem were oppressed by Roman overlords who occupied their land and taxed them without relief. The leaders of the people either actively cooperated with the Romans or grudgingly survived. The people searched for a way out, for a message of hope. In this Jesus they sensed and heard something very different from the party line and they hungered for the freedom it offered.

We are no different. No, we are not occupied by a foreign power. We are more modern and sophisticated—or like to think we are. But the basic human hunger for victory - to be on top, to work hard, to be successful, to seek security - is still deeply embedded in us. Our search for heroes, our drive for possessions, our quest for recognition, become all-important.

These are certainly victories. But they are transitory and hollow. How many of us have the experience of longing for some possession - a car, a coat, some toy or luxury - only to find that when we acquire it the allure is gone? Daily we hear of some hero - a political leader, a sport or entertainment star, a business entrepreneur, a clergyperson - whose deeds do not match their creeds and they fall from grace. We strive for meaning in life, but too often focus the search **outside** of us rather than **within** us.

“If we’d only known.” The irony is that we DO know the transitory nature of these victories yet insist on denying it. We delude ourselves into believing that we have all the time in the world and that our search for power, possessions and prestige will bring us the fulfillment we seek. Then the day of reckoning comes. If I’d only known:

- How precious my children’s childhood would be, I would have spent more time with them.
- How damaging to my reputation that one transgression would be, I never would have done it.
- How draining advancement would be of my family life, I might have delayed it.
- How short life would be, I might have lived more fully.

To fully understand Palm Sunday is to understand that Christ, unlike us, was not deluded by transitory victory. Despite the crowd’s adulation, this would have been evident even to the most ardent supporters on that first Palm Sunday. Conquerors didn’t ride into town on a donkey – a beast of burden – but on a horse, a charger, a steed of battle.

Instead, Jesus’ leadership was servant-leadership. The apostle Paul reminds us of this in the portion of today’s letter to the Philippians in which he quotes one of the most ancient hymns of the Church:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus trusted God, even to the point of his death. The reality is that each of us is also finite and must, sooner or later, face that truth. Will our trust be in the human victories that fade or in servant ministry and the divine victory that springs eternal?

Mark stared at Jesus. What a mixture of joy and sadness he saw in that face. Mark's own excitement was somehow muted. Where was Jesus going? What would become of him?

The parade was gone now and slowly Mark began to walk back to the shop. He felt happy that he had seen Jesus, but a shadow lay on his happiness. Jesus could have run away. He could be far into the hills up north by now, safe from those who wanted him arrested and put in jail. Yet he rode into the city.

When Mark returned to the shop, there stood his father, a strange look on his face. *"Were you there, too?"* he asked. Mark nodded. *"Then I won't scold you for closing the shop."* Mark ran and hugged his father. He looked up and asked, *"Will Jesus be all right?"* His father looked sad and answered, *"Courage is riding at the head of a parade when you know your enemies are looking for you."*