

Circle of Mercy Sermon
“Taking in the Mystery” Mark 11:1-11
March 29, 2015 (Palm Sunday)
by Missy Harris

In some ways, Palm Sunday feels like a bit of a false start because from our vantage point, we already know the rest of the story. With an eye toward the celebration of Easter – toward the promise and hope of resurrection – we can sometimes easily skip over what the rest of this week that we call holy holds.

It’s kind of like the glorious spring weather we had for a few days. We basked in the sun. I don’t know about you, but I was ready for spring to take root and lead us right into summer. But, now here we are wearing our sweaters and coats again, longing for the warmth and radiance of the sunshine that fell upon us for a few days, because winter is holding on for just a bit longer.

We act surprised, and maybe even complain a little, when the temperature drops. Our collective memory (and even the memory plants and trees around us, that dared to release buds and blooms a little early leaning toward the warmth of the light that fills our longer days) have a tendency to forget that this is only the end of March, that we have known and seen cold weather and snow, well into the days of April.

Our tendency is to forget – to convince ourselves that we understand our surroundings, what is happening around us – to act as if we get it and have everything under control.

But, the reality is that, we, like the disciples, forget and need to be reminded. We need to revisit this story. We walk through Holy Week again in order to arrive next week, ready for the promise and hope of resurrection.

So here we are again, waiving our palms and singing “Blessed in the one who comes in the name of God,” and shouting “hosanna.” The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is the familiar story that invites us into this journey of Holy Week each year. In much the same way that we have done with the story of the birth of Jesus, we’ve fused several accounts together to come up with this epic story of the procession and Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem that ushers us into Holy Week, merging and tangling up details from all of the Gospel accounts.

I wonder if our text today can be more than re-hearing a familiar story, already thinking ahead to how everything turns out in the end. I want to invite us to hear the story again, to enter the story with curiosity and with openness to the mystery that might be waiting to be revealed to us.

But what will we notice anew along the journey toward Jerusalem this year? What will catch our attention? What will we see differently? Is there still mystery for us to experience in this familiar story?

Careful and strategic arrangements had been made for the drama of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to unfold. What we have here is an example of street theater at its best – an entrance into the city that would make a bold statement and a lasting impression – an entrance that would lead Jesus toward a final confrontation with the religious and political players in the city. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was all at once – comical, dramatic and political.

People expected that the messiah would enter Jerusalem for a final victory over the powerful and strong, but the way in which Jesus entered Jerusalem was not how they expected the one who would overturn the system to arrive. Jesus entered on the back of a colt, which had not been ridden – a small animal, Jesus' feet probably reaching the ground – not a regal animal, symbolizing strength and pride.

Jesus came as one identified with the poor and the marginalized – not as a valiant warrior. The way that Jesus entered Jerusalem mocked the people in power and fell short of the expectations of others. Jesus drew attention to the fact that he intended to turn the powers upside down, but not in the way people anticipated. They waved their palms, put down their coats in his path and cheered. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem drew attention, but it was the kind of attention that would lead to his ultimate demise.

I suspect that the group that has been gathering on Monday evenings during Lent to focus on the theme and practice of Sabbath has influenced and shaped my reading of our text for today. As I sat with the verses that we just read, the verse that repeatedly caught my attention was the last verse: “Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

Where I found myself lingering in this text was as an observer in the temple. After the crowds had put down their palms and dispersed, after the colt had been returned to its owners, after the disciples had already gone out to Bethany, there was Jesus in the temple, seemingly alone, looking around – taking everything in.

Mark doesn't give us many details in this short verse after the procession has concluded, when Jesus pauses in the temple and looks around. His brevity makes me imagine a simple, quiet moment in a place that was familiar, a place where the other Gospel writers tell us Jesus experienced important, formative moments in his life:

- Luke tells us that Jesus' mother and father took him to the temple time after his birth for the appropriate rituals to be performed.

- Luke also tell us that as a young boy, separated from his parents at another year's Passover celebration, Jesus made his way to the temple and amazed the elders with all that he knew.
- Matthew and Luke tell us that when Jesus was in the wilderness, he was tempted from the pinnacle of the temple to throw himself off and trust God to send angels to catch and care for him.

I lingered with this particular verse where Jesus is in the temple looking around at everything because it left me wondering what was going through his mind at that moment.

Was he contemplating the experiences he had and the people he encountered in that holy space?

Was he preparing himself to return to the temple later in the week to enact another dramatic scene – where he would run out those who were buying and selling, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves, to emphatically say that God's attention is not turned toward those who mirror the economic structures and business practices of the world?

Was he wondering if he would actually be able to follow through with those plans?

Was he considering the implications of what was about to take place – for himself? for his family? for his friends?

After returning to his friends, would he be able to turn his face back toward the city and the people whose cheers would be transformed into taunts and shouts to crucify him?

I imagined that this simple, quiet moment in the temple was one in which Jesus was reorienting and centering himself toward his source and purpose – turning his mind, body and spirit toward that which would give him strength and enable him to face the week ahead. He wasn't confronted with anyone to heal or to engage in conversation or debate.

As I've been working with this text this week, I kept recalling some of what Mark Siler shared with us in his sermon on the second Sunday in Lent. He named how, in the living of our days, we all orient our lives toward something, that we all have a rule of life that we follow, but in general, as Mark said, "we humans have a tendency to orbit around the wrong suns."

This brief pause in the story is where I've found myself wrestling with the question of how and toward what are we orienting ourselves.

Do we leave any space to pause for a brief moment to even consider the question of what we are orienting ourselves toward?

Or, are we content to continue circling around the wrong suns?

I never imagined that I'd say, "I love the Pope." But regularly, these days, I find myself saying those very words as I hear stories about how Pope Francis in turning things upside down, living in ways consistent with his identity as a Jesuit priest – forgoing the elaborate and expensive for simplicity: in his attire, where he lives, how he moves around and even where he goes – slipping out of the Vatican on occasion to be in direct contact with the poor and marginalized.

This past Thursday the Sistine Chapel and areas of the Vatican were closed and the Pope visited the 150 homeless people who were invited into those spaces for private tours by Archbishop Krajewski (who oversees the office of papal charities). Museum staff were there to carry their belongings while they wandered through and toured the centuries old buildings filled with art and beauty and as they were served meals in the Museum's restaurants.

I read recently that Pope Francis estimates that his tenure as Pope will be short-lived, compared to his predecessors. It made me wonder if he senses that his consistent actions challenging of the status quo, questioning the extravagant tendencies of the church hierarchy will lead to a shorter tenure than most. He does seem to be consistently

reorienting himself toward mercy and justice and goodness – siding with the poor and marginalized and challenging others to follow.

This question of what I am orienting myself toward came up for me on Tuesday when I was at a meeting of clergy and lay leaders from several congregations here in Asheville, gathering to talk about the possibility of establishing a Poverty Initiative here. Many of you were hear last week to hear from Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where the Poverty Initiative got its start. The conversation on Tuesday was engaged and lively.

The purpose of the Poverty Initiative is not to **ALLEVIATE** poverty. Its purpose is to **END** poverty, and the path to ending poverty requires privileging the voices and experiences of the poor. Its purpose requires us to orient ourselves toward the crucified among us.

Two homeless people who live here in Asheville were part of this meeting. As the conversation unfolded, the man spoke up and said, “I have to say this. If you want to feel like nothing, like nobody, go spend the night at some of these places in town (proceeding to name specific locations).”

He went on to talk about all of the hoops that people have to jump through just to get inside. Before he can get a bed for the evening, he is forced to sit through a lengthy

worship service, led by a minister who usually preaches about how sinful and terrible they all are.

He commented that he has gone there on a number of occasions, only to leave after a few minutes because he can't take the hatred and dehumanizing tirades – all for a place to lay his head for the night. “After walking around outside all day, I choose to stay outside at night too because I just can't sit there and listen to someone tell me how terrible I am.”

His voice remains in the back of my mind. This is one of those moments of pause for me. What am I going to orient myself toward?

The juxtaposition of these two stories have been at the forefront for me as we arrive here today at Palm Sunday – reminding me that we can not lose sight of what happens between today and next Sunday. When we see one part of the story, it might look like a party and a celebration – that we have arrived in some way. But when we catch glimpses of other parts of the story between today and next Sunday, we know we are far from creating the beloved community on earth as it is in heaven.

So how do we live and walk within this story of triumphal entry?

How do we place ourselves in this subversive story that will lead us directly toward a wild and tumultuous confrontation with the seductive powers that we tend to orient ourselves toward and that we benefit from?

Are we willing to face the consequences of what may happen when we muster the courage to overturn the tables of those things that bind us to the structures and practices that support and enable the status quo, that give priority to the privileged?

What comfort and privilege might we have to be willing to let go of in order to see and hear more clearly?

When such questions are swirling around, I know that it's time to take that moment of slowing down. It's time to take some deep breaths. It's time to look around. It's time to reorient ourselves in order to move forward. Sometimes, much of what enables the big, dramatic actions comes to us in those still moments – in the pauses of our hearts and spirits.

So take the time to pause this week. Take the time to walk through this Holy Week with your eyes and ears and hearts open.

What will you notice anew along the journey toward Jerusalem this year?

What will catch your attention?

What will you see differently?

Where is there mystery for you to experience in this familiar story?

Knowing the rest of the story is both burden and gift. It is burden because we know that the road ahead of us this week is long and winding and, at times, painful. It is, at the same time gift, because we know and have experienced the hope and reality of resurrection in our midst. It is with this hope and reality in view that we pause, look around, reorient ourselves and continue walking into this week.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

As you walk through Holy Week, take these words with you from *Walking Blessing* by Jan Richardson:

That each step
may be a shedding.
That you will let yourself
become lost.
That when it looks
like you're going backwards
you may be making progress.
That progress is not the goal anyway,
but presence
to the feel of the path on your skin,
to the way it reshapes you
in each place it makes contact,
to the way you cannot see it
until the moment you have stepped out.

