

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Palm-Passion Sunday
Year C

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Text: Mark 11:7-10

Title: “The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus—The Final Week”

Over the last five weeks we have traced some of the footsteps of Jesus. His baptism near Jericho led him to walk in the Judean wilderness where he wrestled with the voice of Satan tempting him to bend to personal desires. From there he hiked to Galilee and began his healing and preaching ministry at Capernaum, the village beside the sea where he healed Peter’s mother-in-law. His footsteps led him up mountains on which he proclaimed the presence of God’s kingdom in the here and now and also in the not yet. We stepped on to the boat with Jesus and his disciples and rediscovered his power to calm storms on the sea and in ourselves. We walked the paths he took to the outcast, sinners and the poor as he shared the good news of worshipping God in spirit and truth with someone he shouldn’t have been talking to: the Samaritan woman at the well. And today we find ourselves following him to Jerusalem for his final days of hiking as a human being on this earth. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was not really interested in living up to people’s expectations. In fact, he often broke the rules, crossed lines others wouldn’t cross and it cost him his life.

As we enter Holy Week this morning, I wonder if some of us know the story so well that we are no longer surprised or delighted by the ways in which Jesus did the unexpected, said the unexpected. Can we experience what this final week means for us as human beings and followers of Jesus? What is the message here for us in this 21st century world?

Considering the unexpected ways of Jesus, I remember Doug Mercier. Doug was a district superintendent of our conference years ago. It was his turn to be dean of the bishop’s cabinet and give the report to the conference. He began by telling a story:

It’s a quiet Saturday afternoon in Goose Bend, Wyoming in 1876, and the boys are having a leisurely drink when Ol’ Jeb comes racing into the saloon hollering, “Big John is coming to town! Big John is coming to town!”

The frenzied crowd rushes for the door. Drinks are abandoned on the bar. Hand-rolled cigarettes lie smoldering where they were dropped. Dancing girls shriek in panic and [run] out the back way. The bartender locks up the liquor and is barring the front door.

Before the bartender can secure the saloon, however, a man comes galloping down Main Street on a huge bull buffalo and reins up out front. He dismounts, grabs the buffalo by the horns, bits down on its upper lip, kicks it in the ribs, and orders "Stay!" The buffalo cowers submissively at the hitching post.

The man rips the saloon's bat-wing doors from their hinges, stomps in, and catches the bartender heading for the back door. "Hold up!" the stranger orders. "I crave red-eye."

[The bartender freezes in place,] eyeballs the stranger. He's six and a half feet tall, and outweighs a full-grown grizzly. He wears rattlesnake chaps, a greasy rawhide shirt, a filthy torn Stetson, and steel-tipped fighting boots, and he smells like he hasn't as much as looked at the bathtub in years. On one hip he's carrying a sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun and on the other is a 32-inch Arkansas toothpick. On his scarred, stubbled face is a look of cruel, insane meanness.

"Right away, sir." The trembling bartender fetches a bottle. The stranger seizes the bottle, smashes off the neck on the edge of the bar, tilts it back, and drains the contents in one gulp.

"W-would you like another, sir?" the bartender stammers.

The stranger wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Not on your life! I'm getting' outta here." The stranger looking around anxiously. "Haven't ya heard? Big John's comin' ta town!"_ ([An Encyclopedia of Humor](#))

Based on his experience as a district superintendent, Doug went on to say, he was certain some people thought of them this way, particularly pastors under his supervision.

The impressions we build are often terribly mistaken. We make assumptions. We hear people utter all kinds of warnings that may or may not be based in fact, and we begin to build impressions. We begin to form expectations of other people, and the way in which we react to those persons can often be a result of those expectations.

People had heard something about Jesus, too. Miracles. Mesmerizing teaching. Valuing of people living in poverty whom others ignored and de-valued. Giving hope to people who ground their way through life: prostitutes, fishermen, tax collectors. He didn't back away from lepers, as contagious a group as Ebola carriers. He wasn't afraid of the mentally ill, but proclaimed God's care for them with mysterious, healing power. He didn't appear intimidated by religious authorities with impressive titles, distinguished ritual-ware and rigidly imposed rules. He defended those accused and reminded the self-righteous that "...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." There was a deep strength and freedom about him, a freedom he somehow empowered people to experience in themselves. People had heard something about Jesus. And so there were expectations -- strong expectations -- when he came to town.

He came, the Gospel According to Mark says, riding a young colt. The Greek doesn't distinguish between species. It could have been a camel, a horse, or a donkey. But because this story elicits so much prophetic memory, pointing specifically to Zechariah 9:9 that the Gospel According to Matthew quotes in his telling of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and
riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Scholars concur that the Gospel According to Mark meant it to be a donkey. And although the scripture doesn't say she did, I think of his mother, Mary, riding a donkey on the same road as she and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem where she would give birth to him. It's as if he has come full circle.

A couple of disciples had removed their jackets. The Bible says “cloak” which was a large square piece of woolen cloth fastened at the shoulders, somewhat like a cape but longer. It was their version of an outer jacket. They threw them on the back of the donkey. More now on the ground as people follow their lead and shed their jackets and lay them on the ground. Cutting leafy branches, others laid them down in front of him, like the rolling out of a red carpet for some significant dignitary or academy award guests. A great man coming to lead his people. And so the common shout: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Hosanna is one of those words left untranslated from the Aramaic. It means “Save, I pray!” or “Rescue us!”

Imagining this scene, do you remember that it wasn't that long ago when U.S. Marines moved into Iraqi towns and people were jubilant, shouting common chants, dancing. Did you also notice they were waving palm branches in the air, welcoming those they hoped would liberate them?

Palm Sunday brings us face to face with the hope for salvation. These are people hoping to be free from the tyranny of Roman rule, free from the threat of violence, intimidation and enslavement as Jesus, the King, rides into town.

People had heard about Jesus. They anticipated something significant from him. They anticipated, apparently, a leader, a warrior king, a ruler. God had finally – at last – fulfilled the prophetic promise to send them someone—the Messiah—who would bring freedom, a man to save them from their current oppression. The conqueror had come!

But he wasn't riding an Abram's tank. The kingdom he represented was not Rome or a United States, the most militarily accomplished nation in history. The kingdom he represented was God's kingdom. They are not, of course, one and the same. The savior of God's kingdom rides not on a chariot built for war, but on a humble donkey, a beast of burden, seemingly powerless, as powerless as a pregnant woman making her way to Bethlehem. Odd as it is, the people don't see what is being said by Jesus' chosen mode of transportation. Their expectations built upon what they have heard about him or perhaps from him. He spoke of God's kingdom,

...Like yeast hidden in bread, unseen but makes the whole loaf rise.

...Like a pearl of great price for whom a person would sell everything to possess.

...Like a treasure hidden in a field when discovered a person would dispose of everything in order to buy the field.

...Like a mustard seed: so tiny a person can hardly see it, but when planted it grows to a great shrub so large birds can perch on its branches.

A mystery, this kingdom. But valuable, powerful. It was a natural leap to assume Jesus would be its king.

Jesus rides up to the city gate in the Gospel According to Mark, gets off the donkey, walks up the steps to the Temple mount. Looks around the courtyard as the orange sun is sinking below the Judean hills in the west. Turns around and walks the mile and a half back to Bethany to spend the night. That's it! The parade is over. Jesus is the only one who understood it as a funeral procession.

An English preacher, Dr. Michael Quicke, told a story from the London Sunday Times. A tragic tale of a mother and daughter trapped under tons of concrete when their building collapsed in an Armenian earthquake years ago. No food or water. Just enough space for them to huddle together between two massive slabs of concrete, they endured bitter cold for a week. In the darkness they lay next to one another. The little girl begged for water, but of course there was none. In her desperation, the mother found a piece of broken glass and cut her finger. Told her daughter to suck, the only liquid she had to keep her daughter alive.

"Please, Mama," begged the girl, "cut another finger for me." Fortunately, a few days later, mother and daughter were rescued; the girl having survived no doubt only as a result of her mother's loving sacrifice (Pulpit Resource, April-June 2003).

Jesus is coming to town, but he's not what you might expect. From what might you looking to be saved? From that which causes pain? From that which diminishes who you are as a human being, that which holds you down? Saved...

From homework that seems irrelevant and unnecessary
From bullying brothers or sisters or kids at school
From an overbearing boss
From lack of employment
From overextended debt
From a hated job
From guilt
From the consternation of war
From deeply believed inadequacies
From feeling powerless, used, depressed
From the pain of a son or daughter off to war
From the nagging doubts about God, about life's purpose, about faith

Rescue us, O God! Rescue us! We're glad you're here! We need your peace... within and without!

Jesus is coming to town, but he's not what you might expect. Look for him in the thirsty neighbor or in the eyes of a hungry man standing in an Open Door soup kitchen line. Look for him in the shoppers at a free clothes closet or in an Easter food basket give away. Look for him in the humble places where feet are washed and a simple supper served. Look for him not in the

headline grabbers but in the small print back pages. Don't look for him in the halls of power or gearing up for violent use of force because that is not who he is! His power is different. He's the King of the cross, the king of suffering. He is king in God's kingdom, the kingdom of the here and now but also the not yet. Jesus is King!