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Palm Sunday Sermon 113 April 9, 2017

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

In I Samuel, God is disappointed in Saul and sends Samuel to choose a new King of the people of Israel. Samuel sees Eliab, the eldest son of Jesse and says: "Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him." But God admonishes Samuel: "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Hold that thought for a moment.

Now, let's consider the two processions entering Jerusalem. Jesus enters into the city at the Feast of Passover. The crowd that is waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks are not all local people; many have followed him from Galilee to take part in the procession. Marcus Borg reminds us that Jesus's riding on a donkey into Jerusalem was based on a passage from the Book of Zechariah. "(Jesus) would be a king of peace who would banish chariots, warhorses, and battle bows from the land and command peace to the nations (Zech. 9:9-10). By riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey, Jesus enacted his message: the kingdom of God of which he spoke was a kingdom of peace, not violence."

There is a second procession entering Jerusalem from the opposite side of Jerusalem. And it was an Imperial procession of which Zechariah was referring to. Borg goes on to describe the other procession this way. "The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate rode into the city at the head of a very different procession: imperial cavalry and foot soldiers arriving to reinforce the garrison on the Temple Mount...imagine the scene as Pilate's procession entered the city, a panoply of imperial power. Weapons, helmets, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. The pounding of horse hooves, the clinking of bridles, the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust. The eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

We have two different processions with two different sets of onlookers. One group filled with hope and jubilation and another group filled with dread and fear. Borg suggests that "what we call Palm Sunday featured a choice of two kingdoms, two visions of life on earth."

And the people who greeted Jesus with palms and shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!", were hoping that this prophet astride a donkey would overthrow the leader of the other procession, and all that he represented.

He had had tried to tell them. He had tried to tell his disciples. He had been trying to tell them throughout his journey. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus tried three times to convince his disciple of his real mission to Jerusalem. But the people lining the entrance into the city, see what they want to see. They look at Jesus and see a hero, a warrior who will bring in a new world order. They want "law and order" not love your neighbor. They want a political kingdom not a kingdom of God. But that is not the direction that this procession will ultimately take. They project on to Jesus their own aspirations but cannot "see at the heart" of the man.

The Reverend Whitney Rice asks the question: “What does it feel like to have less than a week to live?”

He goes on to suggest that “that’s the situation in which Jesus finds himself when he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The crowds don’t know what’s coming. The disciples have been given hints and even outright declarations from Jesus that the Son of Man will be betrayed into the hands of sinners and killed, but like all of us who know our loved ones will die someday, we shy away from actually imagining what it will be like or admitting that it could happen at any moment. To the disciples and the crowds, this is a moment of incredible potential and excitement. They have seen the miracles Jesus is capable of, who knows what that power might do if they could convince him to turn it against Rome? And his making such a bold entry into the heart of the Romans’ stolen power surely bodes well for that project.

Reverend Rice goes on to describe “what a lonely moment this must be for Jesus, to be surrounded by screaming fans but burdened by the knowledge of how brief their acclaim will be. This is the point of no return for Jesus. By entering Jerusalem on a colt with the crowds laying down their cloaks before him and shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!” he has triggered one prophetic tripwire too many. The Roman rulers and the Jewish religious authorities can no longer pretend that he is insignificant, that he is a fad, that he is not dangerous. Jesus is deliberately provoking the crisis that will end with him nailed to a cross.”

We get caught up in pageantry, if you will. The “Hosanna’s and the palm fronds and “show”; but we forget that there is a game of “hide and seek” occurring. It is like Jesus appearing as a guest on the old TV show, “I’ve Got A Secret”. I know something you don’t know. Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem is more like a funeral procession than a festive parade. There are countless number of people following him and lining the sides of the streets but he is taking this walk alone. Here is a man in the midst of an adoring crowd who is taking one of the loneliest walks of his life. And God sees and God knows.

We, too, may find ourselves on a journey similar to the one that Jesus is on today. Journeys where to the observer everything may seem “OK”; but God can see our heart. We are troubled because we may not be meeting people’s expectations; we are fearful of the journey itself and what the outcome may be. We are scared of disappointing family or friends or even ourselves. The journey may be fraught with pain both physical and emotional. Needless to say, in the end, Jesus’s journey contained both. But as for Jesus, and ourselves, there is vindication and hope. The physical and emotional pain of the present will pass into a new life. In the words of the Psalmist: “This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.”

I have shared this Marilyn McAuley story with you previously; but it is fitting that it be told again on this day.

“As a young man, the lamplighter led a tough, wayward life, Some years after becoming a Christian, former friend taunted him about his new life style. The lamplighter finally said, “The only way I can explain it is this: as I go down the street snuffing out the lamps, and I turn around, I see it’s all dark. That is how it was before I became a Christian. However, when I continue down the street, the lamps before me light my path – that is how it is with Christ.

The man asked, “And how is it when you’ve snuffed out all the lamps?”

The lamplighter replied, “The dawn is coming.”

Let us pray in the words of Janet Morley.

“Jesus our brother, as we dare to follow in the steps you trod,

Be our companion on the way.

May our eyes see not only the stones that saw you but the people who walk with you now;

May our feet tread not only the path of your pain but the streets of a living city;

May our prayers embrace not only the memory of your presence but the flesh and blood who jostle us today.

Bless us, with them, and make us long to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.”

Amen