

Matthew 21:1-17

Why Not Just Sneak In?

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

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*Temple Slide while Matthew 21:12-17 is read.

*At the opening of her book *To Dance with God*, Gertrud Mueller Nelson tells the story of an afternoon she spent absorbed in a project at her sewing machine. Her daughter Annika, three years old at the time, dug into the basket of scraps that sat at her mother's feet. Annika pulled out several long, bright strips of discarded fabric, gathered them up, and slipped away. Gertrud writes about when she went to find Annika, "I tracked her whereabouts to the back garden where I found her sitting in the grass with a long pole. She was affixing the scraps to the top of the pole with great sticky wads of tape. 'I'm making a banner for a procession,' she said. 'I need a procession so that God will come down and dance with us.' With that she solemnly lifted her banner to flutter in the wind and slowly she began to dance." (Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/03/14/palm-sunday-where-the-way-leads/>)

I wonder if Annika had been to worship the Sunday before and participated in a palm processional like the one we had this morning. Maybe her church was usually a little stuffy. At the Presbyterian Church I used to serve, we called it, "buttoned up." But on Palm Sunday there was movement and dancing, palms waving, and people smiling. On that day, the sanctuary seemed a little noisier. There was excitement in the air, something was definitely different. Maybe God is especially close when we gather together and make some noise, Annika wondered. We should do that more often.

For almost as long as there have been people, there have been parades and processions. That's probably one of the reasons the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is so well-celebrated. While many of the stories from the first century are hard for us to relate to, we love a good parade!

*Title Slide

Jesus, as he traveled throughout Galilee and then Judea, had gathered a large number of followers. His anti-Rome, pro-common people message resonated with them. I think it was more than the message, though. It was the delivery. I don't necessarily mean charisma, but there was something about an encounter with Jesus that changed people. The best way I can describe it is that he left people better than he found them.

As Jesus was leaving Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside. They heard Jesus and the large crowd coming toward them and they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David." The crowd, probably wanting to move along, sssshhhed the two men. Undeterred, they shouted again, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David." Jesus stopped and asked the men what they wanted. They said, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Jesus, moved with compassion, touched their eyes and they could see. And when they regained their sight, they followed Jesus.

The men were better for having encountered Jesus. And I have to believe the people in the crowd traveling with Jesus were better after witnessing his show of compassion, his unwillingness to turn away from, to ignore the suffering of other human beings. This is more than a story about Jesus healing two men. It's about encountering Jesus, really seeing him and following him.

And so, the crowd followed him. They left the relative safety of their homes and their villages. It's important to note that, the closer they got to Jerusalem, the more their loyalty to Jesus would cost them. He was already in the crosshairs of the religious leaders. They were the keepers of the law, not some traveling preacher who was doing nothing other than stirring the people up.

As for the Romans, they didn't really care about Jewish law, unless it helped them keep the Jewish people under control. It was less messy and less expensive if their own laws could keep them in line. The collaboration between temple and Roman authorities was about keeping the peace. Neither group would tolerate disruption. It was bad for the business of Empire.

This is the reason that during high holy days, especially Passover, there was an increased military presence in Jerusalem. I mean, what could go wrong? There would be thousands of people descending on the city for the purpose of celebrating their liberation from a previous oppressor. And into that, comes Jesus and a crowd of people who are dangerously devoted to him. His first day in Jerusalem would do nothing to put the authorities at ease.

*The crowd was waving branches and bumping into each other, pressing in on him, as they spread their cloaks and branches on the road, creating kind of a royal carpet. They were all shouting, "Save us!" I've always wondered, was Jesus prepared for that? Had he anticipated that level of emotion? I've always kind of assumed that Jesus was an empath like me, deeply feeling the emotions of everyone else in any situation. Let me tell you, it's exhausting. "Save us!" "Save us!"

We know why the people were shouting those particular words. They were under the thumb of the Roman Empire. They were being taxed so heavily they could barely survive. The religious leaders, who were

supposed to be on the side of the people, were getting rich and gaining status while collaborating with the Roman government. And if you have ever been part of a large protest or even a fan at a sports event, you know that the act of shouting the same thing at the same time is pretty inspiring. Go Cubs Go! Or, “Hell no, we won’t go.”

*In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is very much a “Hell no, we won’t go,” moment. It was a political protest in every sense of the word. Matthew’s version of the story is political in that the crowd was affirming Jesus’ kingship, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” which was a clear rejection of the Roman Empire. They were saying, “Jesus is our king, not Pilate, not Herod, and not Tiberius. That’s political. But, for Matthew, it was also theological. Matthew’s Jesus was part of the story of ancient Israel. His family tree, which the author laid out in chapter 1, supported that. The reference to Zechariah 9, “Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Look your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey,’” points to Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. Donkeys were used for transportation and farming. Horses were for war. Jesus was not a king coming to dominate and intimidate. Jesus was a different kind of king.

*Immediately upon arrival, Jesus went to the temple. Unlike the Gospel of John’s version of this story, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not ask us to picture Jesus with a whip, clearing the money changers and salesman out. Instead, he overturned the tables, disrupting these necessary functions within the temple sacrificial system. Jesus’ anger was not about money changers who exchanged Roman coins for Jewish coins. The temple tax could not be paid with Roman coins. The business of the temple needed money changers. And his anger was not at the ones selling the animals. After all, people came from far away to the temple for Passover. They couldn’t all have been expected to bring their own animal sacrifices. Someone needed to sell the animals. Jesus’ anger was at temple leaders who were more interested in profiting from the

people's suffering and on keeping Rome's kind of peace than they were in reconciling the people to God.

The temple held tremendous royal significance, David planned the temple, Solomon built it, and it is here we see very clearly, where the tension between Jesus and the authorities was going. Jesus' actions in the temple were an act of judgment...on the authorities. In casting out the traders, he effected a brief symbolic break in the sacrificial system that formed the temple's purpose for existence. Once the system was disrupted, something new could happen. Jesus would offer healing and cast a vision for the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus believed was already coming to be. And like so much of Jesus' ministry, this was good news for some people and bad news for others. In the coming days of Jesus' last week, Matthew would use the temple as the setting for the parables of Jesus of which we have become familiar lately.

* It would be easy for us to run ahead because we know those stories, we know they will do nothing but increase the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. And we know the cost to Jesus and his followers. We know there will be a last meal with his closest friends, prayer in the garden, a betrayal, an arrest. There will be alienation, lies, and desperation. It will end in violence and death. But let's not go there yet.

Let's stay with the crowd that followed Jesus from Galilee, into Judea, all the way to Jerusalem. I have so many questions, but mainly one. And maybe you have the same question. What exactly did the crowd think Jesus was going to do? I know why they wanted him to do something, but what did they think he would do? I'm a pacifist and even I see no alternative other than violence. And I don't think we have any evidence to suggest that Jesus would have considered that. It was dangerous for all of them to be associated with someone who was publicly rejecting

the power structure in place. The Romans could easily squash them. As they were walking along, what did they think was going to happen?

I tried to imagine myself in the midst of that crowd. Truthfully, I don't think they had any idea what would happen. I think they were all hanging their hats on their own experiences of Jesus. All they knew was that their encounter with him had changed them. It had given them the courage to reclaim their own story. Their story, which coincidentally is our story, is a story of liberation. Because of Jesus, they found themselves believing they could be free. Their people had been oppressed, even enslaved, before and they had been liberated...from Pharaoh in Egypt, from the Babylonians and the Assyrians. I don't know if they had any idea how freedom would come, but their encounters with Jesus gave them reason to believe it was possible. That belief in what was possible gave them courage to walk with him into Jerusalem. And in that moment courage was enough.

I find that courage for a moment is usually enough. We just need to be brave as we say the first few words or do the first part of the very hard thing. Because after that, we're committed. But sometimes, life happens and courage needs to be sustained. In the days to come, as we walk through the stories of Holy Week, there will be moments when the courage of Jesus' followers is stunningly absent. And moments when we are witness to courage that takes our breath away. Life is like that.

May you encounter Jesus this week in ways that give you courage for whatever part of the journey you are on. May the moments of intense community, stark isolation, deep darkness, and anxious waiting, that are part of the stories of Holy Week, draw you into deeper connection with God and with the person you were created to be. And may you find a moment of joy in which to lift up a flower, a banner, an accomplishment, a memory, that God might come down and dance with you. Amen.