

Our sanctuary has been Lent-ified. In case you are not familiar with the term Lent-ified, it means that our sanctuary has been made ready for the season of Lent. You will note the paraments, along with the banners, have been changed from green to purple. On Wednesday, at the Ash Wednesday service, we brought in the symbols of Lent and set them on the communion table. Our theme for the season is *On the Move: Journey to Jerusalem*. In the coming weeks, we will encounter various journey-related items in our worship space, such as the compass above the communion table, the walking stick and ski pole, and, of course, the cairn in front of the pulpit.

I am fascinated by cairns. They are so much more than really cool photo ops. Cairns are directional, used on trails as markers to indicate which way to go and to reassure trail walkers they are, indeed, on the right path. People build cairns for other reasons too. For example, there are cairns that serve as a declaration, “I was here. This place and this time were important.” In the biblical narrative, piles of rocks were altars for sacrifice, used by the priests as they mediated the relationship between God and the people. In Joshua 4, after the Israelites crossed the Jordan River on dry land, they were instructed to take 12 rocks and put them in a pile in the midst of the camp in Gilgal. The purpose of this cairn was to make sure the people remembered that God was faithful in caring for the Israelites. The idea was that the children would see the pile of rocks and say, “Hey dad, what’s up with those rocks?” And the adults would answer them saying something like, “These rocks remind us that God is on our side, making a way when there doesn’t seem to be one.” The rocks also marked the end of that part of the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land.

So, here we are at the beginning of a journey of our own. The season of Lent is a journey, and while on the road together, we will read the portion of Mark’s gospel that has Jesus and his disciples on their journey to Jerusalem. Imagine the group walking along the roads of Galilee. You know how it is when large groups walk together. Everyone starts out together, having the same conversation, but as time goes on, the group spreads out a little and pretty soon there are several different conversations happening at once. While the group was still all together, Jesus, for a second time, predicted his own death and resurrection. The first time this happened, it was quite a shocker for the disciples. You will recall, Peter blurted out something like, “Are you out of your mind? Knock it off, you’re freaking everybody out.” Jesus’ response to Peter was quite stern, “Get behind

me Satan." This time was different though. Not one of the disciples asked questions or said a thing, not because they fully understood what Jesus was talking about, but because they remembered Jesus' scolding of Peter the last time and thought better of it.

The group continued to walk along and later, they must have spread out a little because the disciples had a side conversation that, apparently, they thought Jesus was unable to hear.

This is Mark 9:33-37:

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

I have this image of the disciples walking behind Jesus, doing the loud whispering, while arguing thing like my brother and I used to do in the car when we were young. It was like we were yelling at each other quietly, so our parents couldn't hear us. "I'm the greatest." "No, you're not, I am." "I was great before you were born." "If you had been great, mom and dad wouldn't have had to have another child." "That's not what happened. I was so great they thought their second child would be great too. Man, was that a disappointment." And so on. It occurs to me now, having experienced parenting myself, my mom heard every word we said and just didn't say anything because at least we were leaving her alone.

Anyway, Jesus and the disciples arrive in Capernaum, a Galilean town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

No journey is complete without a map. On the screen there is a map of 1st century Israel. The red star near the top is Capernaum and the purple star near the bottom is Jerusalem, where we will end up in a few weeks. For reference, the towns were about 85 miles apart. At this first stop on the way, they get to the house where they are staying and Jesus wastes no time. I bet you could have

heard a pin drop when he asked what they had been arguing about on the way. Nobody answers, which honestly is a good call, I think.

The author of Mark makes it seem that Jesus knew what they had been arguing about and tells us that Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Scholars think it’s unlikely this is something Jesus would have actually said and here is why they think that. While the saying has a Jesus-like ring to it because it sounds a little bit like a riddle and its message would definitely have been good news to some and bad news to others (which was Jesus-y as well), this particular saying seems to indicate there were leadership issues in the ranks which was much more likely in the author of Mark’s community than in Jesus’. The people following Jesus were following him because they thought he was the greatest, so they probably wouldn’t have been arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Something was happening in Mark’s community that made him want to have Jesus talking about servant leadership.

So, to drive his point home, Mark centered a child.

He tells us Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” In the first century Mediterranean world, a child didn’t contribute much of anything to the economic value of a household or community. A child could do nothing to enhance the patriarch of the family’s position in society. In other words, offering hospitality to a child wasn’t going to have any kind of payoff, certainly not like extending hospitality to an adult who had some status or a little bit of change in their pocket would have. For Mark and Mark’s community, the child is a symbol used to represent anyone who was vulnerable, anyone for whom the imperial kin-dom was not working.

I was forced to read John Bunyan’s book, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in seminary. I did not love it. However, I do love these words, written by Bunyan, “You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.” In Mark’s world, a child was a perfect example of that. Today, his point might be better made by having Jesus put his arms around an immigrant or a senior citizen living in a nursing home, a person of color or member of the LGBTQ+ community or even, in some contexts, a woman. The point 2000 years ago and the point for us today is, it is the responsibility of leaders, people with position, privilege, and power, to center the needs of the ones who are vulnerable, to put their needs

first, even as the world urges us to grab what we need first, holding to it tightly, resisting anything that would put “us” at risk of losing it.

There was an event planner who was responsible for making the seating arrangements for the head table at an important dinner event celebrating the end of an enormous fundraising effort in a large community. A group of non-profit organizations had collaborated to start a fund that would be used to support a partnership in which these non-profits would share resources to provide practical, hands-on, help to people in the community living on a fixed income. The partnership was geared primarily to helping senior citizens.

At one end of the head table the executive directors of the non-profits would be seated. At the other end, there were some senior citizens whose stories had been used in the marketing material for the fundraiser. They were people who had worked their whole lives and looked forward to retirement only to find they barely had money to eat. Prescriptions and high property taxes were making the retirement they had planned impossible. There were some key donors at the table as well. The event planner seated the donors among the senior citizens thinking they would like to be face to face with the real people their dollars were helping.

Having put the place cards by each place, the planner left the banquet hall to take care of some other details. That evening, when she returned shortly before the dinner started, she came in just in time to see one of the donors move his place card to the other end of the table to sit near the executives. When my friend asked him if there was a problem, the donor replied, “I was seated at the wrong end of the table. I’m a donor. I belong at this end of the table.”

I wonder, in what ways do we, without even thinking about it, position ourselves first or greatest?

I have a friend who has had hearing aids since she was a child. Because of our friendship, I am very aware of the importance of using microphones when they are available. On many occasions, we have been together at conferences and workshops and even in churches when the speaker has been offered a microphone and refused it saying, “I’ve been told I have a big mouth. Let me know if you can’t hear me,” and everyone laughs. Unfortunately, refusing a

microphone leaves the ones who can't hear with the burden of interrupting the presentation to tell the speaker they can't be heard.

I've heard stories from friends in the LGBTQ+ community who long for a world in which pictures of families in advertising, books, magazines, Sunday School rooms, schools, and movies look more like their families. This lack of representation creates the illusion that some families are more valuable, some families are first. People of color have a similar experience. Historically, in movies and TV, families that include people of color have been portrayed as dysfunctional, not as educated, and lacking mainstream values.

Today's text reminds us of the importance of moving through the world aware of our impact on other people. It reminds us that we have a tendency to cling to the way things are when those ways are working for us. We have to know that leaving things the way they are does nothing for the ones for whom things are not working. Mark's message to his community was that God's kin-dom will turn the world upside-down. Things will be different.

As we travel the road to Jerusalem with Jesus and his disciples, we will see that, while they had spent a significant amount of time together, Jesus knew the disciples still had a lot to learn. I read a commentator this week that compared Jesus' final days with his disciples to a parent, in the midst of dying young, trying to prepare their child to face the world without them. This commentator imagined the child unwilling to accept that their parent was dying and so they were unable to glean anything from the lessons being taught. So, even as the tension ramps up between Jesus and religious leaders, Jesus was experiencing some anxiety of his own. There was a lot to teach these people and not much time left to do it. Would his movement die with him?

This lesson today is one that, in a variety of ways, Jesus taught over and over again. People matter. All people matter, even if they aren't particularly likable, even if they aren't like us, even if they say and do things we think are ridiculous. They matter. And if we are really interested in following the ways of Jesus, then we have to try to create a world in which there is a place for everyone.

And, by extension, a church in which there is a place for everyone. That means sometimes we will sing songs you hate. Sometimes I will say things you disagree with. Sometimes the sanctuary will be loud because we really do welcome

children. Sometimes we will disappoint each other, but we must remember that, at the heart of who we are, is the desire to follow Jesus more fully and to work together to bring about the upside-down world he talked about. And this work is going to take every one of us, young and old and everyone in between.

***(cairn)**

This journey to Jerusalem is going to challenge us and, if we let it, it is going to change us. This place and this time are important. I am so glad we are here together. Amen.