

Palms Along the Way
Mark 11: 1-11

Yesterday millions of people around the globe rose up and marched in protest of what has been and with hope of what can be. A collective march for justice and peace over and against a world that seems to create and thrive on chaos and fear. From the beginning of time people have come together to draw strength from one another, to find the power and comfort of a collective voice, and to make known the firm and certain belief that the humanity of 'us' is called to become better than we are now. Whether by design or not, it is most fitting that this compelling expression of solidarity fell on the day before the world remembers what we have come to call Palm Sunday, the day when Jesus marched.

News flash: Palm Sunday is not mini-Easter, a sneak preview of the resurrection. Yes, Lent, like winter, has been long. One can only be introspective for so long without becoming a bit antsy, ready to jump at the possibility of Easter, much like we were all so excited a few weeks ago about those early daffodils daring to peek through the ground. This day that has come to be known by the leafy branches that were spread along the path to Jerusalem instead launched the darkest and most intense week of Jesus' life. The gospel of Mark, which is the shortest and most succinct of the four, devotes almost 1/4 of the book, or 3-1/2 chapters, to the events leading to Jesus' arrest in this last week. In the midst of the hubbub of Passover when Jews flooded Jerusalem, Jesus' entry into the holy city, along with his increasingly sharp and direct attacks on faith leaders, sealed his fate. Up until then Rome was merely irked by the wandering rabbi and his tendency to draw crowds. But on this day with a simple march Jesus crossed the line dividing faith and politics, insuring that Rome and the faith leaders would become co-conspirators in his death.

On the surface it certainly appeared to be a joyous moment for Jesus and the disciples. Though necessarily small on scale, it was still quite the parade! Everything in it - the donkey, the cloaks, the branches - indicated the dawn of a new era, victory for the oppressed. Though

not stated directly in Mark, it was a clear reference to the prophet Zechariah who told of the Messiah bringing in God's kingdom in a similar fashion:

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.
 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
 and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations;
 his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.¹

The cries of the people further endorsed their support of Jesus and his march for their shouts of 'Hosanna' were pleas for salvation, grounded in the history of a people who had known captivity far longer than they had experienced independence. 'Hosanna' or הושיעה-נא in Hebrew means 'save us', and their calls as Jesus rode into the city were found in the 118th Psalm:

Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
 O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.^{*2}

Deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, Jesus' march into Jerusalem would also have been seen as subversive, even treasonous, for it mirrored another day from 150 years previously when a similar entry into the city marked the beginning of the Maccabean Revolution, a key factor in the downfall of the massive Greek empire. As ridiculous as it seemed that a peasant rabbi riding a donkey could do anything against the tight grip of the Roman Empire, history had proven time and time again that a small group of people could indeed overthrow even the most powerful force in the world.

Yet this was not Alexander the Great of Greece entering Jerusalem on his famous warhorse, the black stallion Bucephalus. This was not Pontius Pilate and his Passover parade of gleaming chariots and dazzling weaponry. Jesus' choice of mount was nothing like the saber-rattling displays meant to intimidate the weak and stroke the ego of the powerful. Instead, his was the most unmilitary mount imaginable - a donkey, the sign of humility, poverty, and peace. What a confusing turn of events for Rome, for the people of Jerusalem, for the followers

¹ Zechariah 9: 9-10 NRSV

² Psalm 118: 25-26a NRSV

of Jesus! This was to be the path of triumph, of ridding themselves of their horrible oppressor? A nomadic teacher on a donkey? This was absolutely nothing the world expected or even wanted.

Over the years I have preached a few times on this Palm Sunday parade, one in which the branches are in actuality but a bit player in the drama of the day. The more I have read, researched, and learned, the more I have come to deeply appreciate the nonviolent radical activism of Jesus of Nazareth and to see the shape his words and actions took over the span of his time on earth. His first step in every word and action he took was always grounded in loving relationship with God, with others, with ourselves. Love - no strategic plan, no grand maneuvers or manipulations, no goal to take over the world. But love, simply love. It was a love, not based on Valentine's Day emotion or Hallmark card feelings, but one rooted in daring grace, one of acceptance and hope in what could be. It was for that reason the Church came into being. We, as the Body of Christ in the world, are to create the space for people to be welcomed, loved, and known as they are, just as they are, with no expectations yet with all belief in what can be. It's a challenge, one historically that has more often failed and instead become exclusionary and judgmental, as the Church has positioned itself in superiority over the 'fallen' of the world. Ironically, that was precisely the kind of faith that Jesus would so vehemently protest throughout his life. Our journey as people of faith was never meant to be one of domination over worldly power and constriction by a false righteousness. It is not about guaranteed seats in a distant and nebulous heaven, nor is it about condemnation of those who might be seen as sinners. We were created to be people of a living faith, who walk alongside one another, who love, and who are loved.

We are to love as the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. These words are so familiar, but imagine them being your guiding principle at all times and in all ways:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.³

Not exactly a winning formula for the art of the deal. Yet this love is the wellspring from which Jesus' life and ministry flowed. As he taught and demonstrated, this is a difficult, difficult love, one that does not flow easily from our human hearts. We are to love in such a way - as Jesus did - with a love that seeks and leads to a justice protectively encircling and lifting up the oppressed and vulnerable. Such justice is not about 'fairness' nor condemnation nor reward but is instead to pave the way to God's own love. We love so that the unlovable might know the powerful gentleness of being loved. We love so that the hungry will no longer know the painful emptiness of body and spirit. We love so that the hurting will be held by comfort, the despairing might be able to reach out for hope, the broken might come to discover wholeness, the trapped learn the exhilaration of freedom. That was Jesus' purpose for living, for dying, for showing us all new life. Such justice makes room for all people to breathe, to love, to live fully as God intended. Justice creates a world where children do not have to live in fear of being shot in school. Justice shields the vulnerable so they do not have to fear medical bills that can destroy them. Justice does not tear families apart through rigid and cruel immigration standards. Justice allows a young black man to talk on his cell phone in his own yard without fear of being killed. It's why Jesus marched into Jerusalem. It is why people still march today. Justice, a justice of love and grace.

There is no doubt that to risk following Jesus in such a way is to invite challenge, derision, perhaps even persecution and death. Just ask Jesus or others who emulated him such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mahatma Gandhi. But just as many have lived long productive lives as well: Mother Teresa was 87, Rosa Parks 92, Dorothy Day 93, Nelson Mandela 95. Each of them chose to live, standing firm for justice regardless of

³ I Corinthians 13: 1-7 NRSV

crippling pain, regardless of the seemingly overwhelming presence of evil, regardless of the powers that threatened to take away their freedom. They chose to take their faith into the streets so that the humanity of others would never again become diminished and all could embrace their inherent value as God's good and beloved creation.

Yet there are some who would rather our words be more temperate, our actions be more modest, our faith be less threatening. Jesus experienced that from the leaders of the faith who admonished him time and time again to fall in line. Even his own followers tried to rein him in and protect him from the dangers of the world. Yet as he had done throughout his life, Jesus took the path leading to justice and marched into Jerusalem. All for a joyous love that would not be constrained by boundaries of any kind, for a generous justice that encompassed all creation, and for an infinite grace that drew us all into God's embrace.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sat in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, for daring to join the civil rights march there, some colleagues admonished him to be more judicious and patient. Rather than becoming angry and lashing out, he wrote an impassioned letter that spoke of the heart of his faith:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century BC left the villages and towns and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Graeco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom....
I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.⁴

So King marched until the day he died. In the way of Jesus, he marched with his feet, he marched with his words, he marched with his life.

Jesus' march would lead to his death, but more importantly, it led to life for the world. In his daring activism he showed a new way to live and love, one that we dare follow today. He called for a compassionate world that valued all people, believing that such a life could become

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. 1963. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-birmingham-city-jail-1>

a reality. We as God's people continue to march, to protest injustice, to live a defiant love, to hope that the world and we ourselves can become more loving and just in the way of Jesus himself. Few of us directly participated in yesterday's *MarchForOurLives* or in any of the marches that have shaped our recent history - the Women's March, Occupy Wall Street, Vietnam protest rallies, Civil Rights marches. That might not be your particular call. But we are all called to march with every fiber of our beings for a love far greater than anything we could do on our own, for a justice that treasures all but especially the most vulnerable, for a grace that is as great and generous as God's own heart. Though we might fear, we might doubt, we might grow weary, we march in the way we love and live, creating space for others to be loved, cherishing each person's God-given humanity, opening the Table of our lives for all.

When I was putting together my ordination service, which seems like was light years ago now, I discovered this 20th-century hymn that is probably one of the more obscure ones in our hymnal today. Yet just as it sang to me so long ago, I can imagine that these words could well have been in Jesus' soul as well as he marched into Jerusalem on that fateful day:

So, help me in my unbelief and let my life be true.
Feet firmly planted on the earth, my sights set high on you.⁵

So, in the way of Jesus, let us continue to march. Let us march for our lives and for the lives of others. Let us march for our faith in the God of love, justice, and grace. Let us march now and always. Amen.

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⁵ Lord, *When I Came into This Life*. Music: American folk melody arranged by Annabel Morris Buchanan 1938. Words: Fred Kaan 1976. © 1979 Hymn Society of America. Texas Christian University. Fort Worth, Texas.