

***“A Temporary Triumph”***

***Mark 11:1-10***

***4/14/2019***

***Palm Sunday***

Early in the twentieth century, Kaiser Wilhelm visited Jerusalem. When the Kaiser entered the Holy City for the first time, he was mounted on a magnificent white stallion, instead of a colt like Jesus. Instead of going through one of the gates of the city, he had a new entrance chopped out of the walls to make his entrance unique. He rode through the gap and staged his version of his triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. He was, indeed a conqueror - temporarily - in his own right, but his triumphal entry bore no resemblance to that of Jesus (not anything like the results of Jesus' glorious entrance.) The world has long forgotten the Kaiser's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, partly because he and his army went down to an ignominious defeat in World War I, but the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem will be told forever - along with the full story of what happened in the following week that led to complete victory for God over the forces of darkness and evil. (This account of history came from George Bass, a professor at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in Minnesota in the 1990's.)

One has to wonder how many Kaisers, how many would be conquerors, have there been riding through throngs of people, and how many have stood the test of time?

Our story today from Mark's gospel, no matter its historical accuracy is different than other triumphal entries, in that it speaks of the eternal, rather than the temporal. It speaks of divinity, of spiritual victory rather than physical victory. Jesus entered Jerusalem, not to claim victory, but to face inevitable loss of prestige and influence, into near certain death. The spreading of garments at his feet, the waving of palm branches notwithstanding. These acts quickly gave way to calls for crucifixion, rather than a coronation as the Messiah. Seen from the perspective of the moment of entering Jerusalem, being welcomed by an adoring crowd, Jesus' arrival, was like the Kaiser's. It was temporary.

Yet, from the perspective of our faith story, it was anything but temporary. The two stories end very differently. The accounts of Palm Sunday call us to reexamine what is victory and what is defeat, as it calls us to decide what is lasting and what is temporary, calls us to see life and what we value from a whole new perspective. It is a perspective that claims suffering, defeat and death as something other than permanent.

Ken, a former colleague of mine, like all of us who have lived long enough, has had his share of trouble. One child was killed in a horrible accident, and another suffered chronic emotional illness, largely as a result of his brother's death. After some of these tragedies, he preached a sermon on prayer. I came across it again the other day. In it he noted:

*I asked God to take away my pride and  
God said, No.  
He said it was not for him to take away,  
but for me to give up.*

*I asked God to make my handicapped child whole  
and God said, No.  
He said his spirit is whole  
his body is only temporary.*

*I asked God to grant me patience,  
and God said, No.  
He said that patience is a by-product of tribulation  
it isn't granted, it's earned.*

*I asked God to give me happiness,  
and God said, No.  
He said he gives blessings,  
happiness is up to me.*

*I asked God to spare me pain  
and God said, No.  
He said suffering draws you apart from worldly cares  
and brings you close to me.*

Ken, it would seem, got the message of that first Palm Sunday. In an age of quick fixes, such as alcohol, drugs, prestige, economic success, Palm Sunday comes as a caution. What seems like victory may not, in fact, be victory. What seems like failure may, in fact, be something far more victorious. The way of the Divine may be clearer to those willing to walk through the valley, may be clearer to those seeing from the perspective of riding on a colt. It may be clearer when one can see God's willingness and ability to work a victory out of any situation.

Palm Sunday takes a turn. Seeming victory becomes a defeat. Adoring crowds soon become a crucifixion seeking mob. It just does not turn out as the world would have supposed, which by the way is typical. As my father used to say, using dated and sexist language, "Man proposes, but God disposes." Who of us have not known broken dreams? Who of us hasn't experienced disappointment? How often, as a pastor someone has shared her story with me. How often his story is mistaken for something it is not. Defeat, as we often assume, is not the same as the absence of God.

I think so often of Phoebe, one of the first parishioners I visited as a pastor. She was a shut-in, confined to a wheelchair, severely limited with arthritis. She was poor, and lived in a tiny, badly maintained apartment house. Outwardly she might have been considered by some to be a loser. She was well into her eighties and economically had little to show for it. I remember that first visit clearly. I remember initially feeling pity for her. Well I was in for a major surprise, just as those calling for the death of Jesus were in for a surprise. Phoebe, it turned out, was as full of life and joy as anyone I have ever known. Her joy was contagious. In language that might strike some as simple and naive, she told me she had no regrets about her life. "People" she said "think of me as this poor, helpless old lady. Well maybe I am, but I don't feel that way. God has been good to me. He has gotten me this far and has a better life for me when this one is over. I pray every day, keeping in touch with God, so I never forget how good my life is."

Like Ken, she knew the message of Palm Sunday. There is more to life than our culture teaches us. There is "the peace which passes all understanding," the peace that gives the courage to walk into Jerusalem. There is a peace that one gets on the back of a colt as he realizes God is in charge, no matter what the moment might suggest.

Jesus knew what lay ahead of him, yet he went. Why? Because he knew a triumph that is eternal. He knew a victory that was lasting. He knew, that come what may, God was his sustainer and as long as he held onto that awareness he would be okay.

There is indeed something about this Palm Sunday story that grips our attention. I used to think it had to do with a victorious entrance, but I've become less and less sure that it was ever victorious. If by that it is implied that Jesus had convinced most others that he was all they had hoped the "Son of God" to be. The events of the week following that first Palm Sunday clearly indicate the victorious entrance was momentary. It was fleeting.

Or was it? A decision is called for. Do we see as he saw? Is every defeat an occasion for God to work a miracle of resurrection? Is every loss a possible moment of gain? Was his triumph temporary? Are we ready for the possibility that our understanding of victory and defeat, eternal and temporal, need to be redefined?

*Many people spread their cloaks on the road,  
and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.  
Then those that went ahead of him and those who followed shouted,  
“Hosanna!”*

...

*Blessed is the coming Kingdom...  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!  
Then he entered Jerusalem...*

Was it worth his while? Was it a lasting victory? Does it cause you to reevaluate what matters and what does not?

Is it for you a Hosanna moment? Is it ÷Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord?ø If so, wave your palms, welcome and walk in the way of Jesus, who comes in the name of God. Amen.