

OPEN THINGS UP!

Palm Sunday – March 29, 2015
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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Mark 11:1-11

SCRIPTURE

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

The Word of the Lord...

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Historians tell us that the city of Jerusalem has been conquered and reduced to rubble seventeen times down through the centuries. Seventeen times invading armies have broken down the walls and fortifications, killed the inhabitants, taken away anything of value, and left the city of Jerusalem not much more than a garbage dump. Today most of the city is an extensive modern metropolis, with glass and steel high-rise buildings, traffic jams, and shopping malls. But on the east side of the modern urban sprawl there is a section of the city, roughly three quarters of a mile square, that is known as the Old City. It is here that all of the Biblical and historic events have occurred over its four thousand year history.

A massive wall surrounds the Old City of Jerusalem, some thirty or forty feet high in places. You can walk all the way around the Old City on top of this wall, and as you do, it is easy to imagine stories of King David and Herod and Pontius Pilate. But the truth is that the wall is not nearly so old. The Ottoman Turks built this wall around 500 years ago in 1530. That may be old for something here in Iowa, but in a land where archaeologists dig up ruins more than five thousand years old, something 500 years is considered modern.

To enter into the Old City, you must pass through one of seven gates in the wall, but when the wall was originally built, it had eight gates. The largest and most lavishly decorated one was called the Golden Gate, partly because it was so embellished, and partly because it faces due east. At dawn, when the sun first appeared up over the Mount of Olives, the first rays would shine on this gate, making it bright and radiant. However, less than 100 years after the Ottomans built these walls around the Old City, they bricked up the Golden Gate. It remains closed to this very day.

The reason that the Ottomans closed the Golden Gate is that the Jews living in Jerusalem at the time believed that the Messiah would enter into the city through that gate and free them from the Turks. The ruling Caliph did not want that to happen, so he shut down the Golden Gate. As further insurance, the Ottomans turned the area outside the gate into a cemetery, knowing that a devout Jew would not defile himself by walking on the grave of a gentile. Thus they felt they had thwarted any Jewish messianic arrival into the city of Jerusalem.

Now, while certainly the structure of the Golden Gate is only 500 years old, most archaeologists believe that the current gates in the wall were built upon the sites of ancient gates. Most scholars believe that it is likely the main entrance into the ancient city of Jerusalem, from Bethany and the Mount of Olives, was located approximately where the Golden Gate stands today. So the great irony, from a Christian perspective, is that the Ottoman Caliph was around 1500 years too late in blocking that entrance to the city. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, has already entered through that gate and we commemorate that event today, Palm Sunday. Today we celebrate our Lord's triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, five days before his arrest and crucifixion.

Today, people still try to block out the arrival of the Messiah, the Christ, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. But it is not any kind of a gate that is closed; it is minds that are closed. They refuse to allow any thoughts to enter their heads of just exactly who Jesus might be. That doesn't mean they are not religious. They may be very faithful church members. They may serve on session or as a deacon. But they do all they can to prevent Jesus from entering into their lives.

Our Scripture lesson for this morning is a familiar story. We read it every year on this Sunday. It is a story of celebration, of excitement and anticipation. It is also the story of people with closed minds, people who are unable to see what is going on right in front of their faces. There are three different groups of people in this story who have closed minds. Each has a different reason for not understanding what Jesus is doing when he enters Jerusalem. Let's look at each group and their reasons for trying to shut out Jesus. Perhaps if we understand why they acted the way they did, it will help us to open things up, to allow Jesus in to change us and make us whole.

The first group was the Twelve; the disciples Jesus hand-picked as the inner circle. Their minds were closed because of fear. They were afraid to face the facts. Now, when the gospels refer to the disciples of Jesus, they are not always talking about just the Twelve. On the day of Pentecost it says there were 120 believers waiting for the Holy Spirit. So there was a large group of followers who believed in Jesus. In our text for today it says that two disciples went into the village and retrieved the colt, but it does not mention them by name. In fact none of the Twelve are mentioned specifically in any of the accounts of Palm Sunday. They do not seem to be the ones who spread branches and their cloaks before Jesus. It does not say any of the Twelve cried, "Hosanna!" And I find that rather strange. Sometimes silence speaks louder than words.

Now, I may be reading something into this, but if the Twelve were indeed silent, why might that be? The answer lies in some verses just before this story. Mark 10:32 says that those who were on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus were afraid, and then it states, "He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death..."

Jesus was very clear with the Twelve. This trip to Jerusalem was no sightseeing tour. Humiliation, pain and death lay in store for him. The other gospels say the Twelve did not understand what this all meant, but perhaps it was all so frightening that they did not want to even think about it. So when the crowd surged up around Jesus on the donkey, perhaps the Twelve were scared speechless. "Is this it?" They wondered. "Are things about to get so out of hand that the Romans will step in and arrest us? What is happening here?" Their fear kept them from seeing what Jesus was actually doing.

Sometimes we are afraid to face the facts. Many of us would like to go straight from the palms of today to the sunrise and empty tomb of Easter. We don't want all that stuff in between. We don't want the agony in the garden, his betrayal by one he trusted and to see the one he loved deny him. We don't want even to think about his bare back bleeding under the lash or of nails ripping through flesh and bone. Because if we were to focus on all that Jesus endured, we might have to face some hard facts within ourselves. We might realize that our efforts at being faithful followers of Jesus Christ are pretty pathetic. Fear and shame closes our minds and we try to keep Christ out.

The second group with closed minds was the crowd. They were interested in taking the easy way out and so they ignored the facts. Some have seen this incident as a political event. They think the crowd was welcoming Jesus, hoping that he would rally the nation to overthrow the Roman conquerors. But that is probably not what was happening.

The cry, "Hossana! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" is taken from Psalm 118. It was the song that pilgrims sang to welcome one another to Jerusalem at Passover. Everyone who arrived in the city on that particular day was greeted with hosannas. Now, the branches and the cloaks on the road before Jesus were not routine. That kind of treatment was reserved for a celebrity, someone who was popular and admired. But the whole attitude of the crowd was more of a festive party spirit. They were interested in what was fun, in what was convenient. They were not so much a band of revolutionaries as a bunch of party goers on spring break.

The crowd was just out to have a good time. Oh, they knew Jesus was a great teacher and someone who performed miracles. They knew he spoke with authority and sometimes would put the haughty priests in their place. They knew he liked to go to dinners and parties. They knew all this, but were not interested in going any further. They really did not care why Jesus was in Jerusalem and what he was trying to do. Since they were willing to take the easy way out, they were fickle. It is not all that surprising that five days later the same crowd who cried "Hosanna!" would now cry, "Crucify him!"

All too often we are more concerned with what is the easiest thing to do, rather than what is right or wrong or what God might be asking us to do. It is easy to donate food and clothing for the Food Pantry and Helping Hand Store. It is another matter to become involved with the people who use these services, to get to know their names and listen to their stories. It is easy to be a greeter welcoming people who walk through our doors. It is not so easy to personally invite someone to come to church. It is easy just to keep everything in our church just the way it is. It is not so easy to explore creative ways in which God might be wanting to use us in our community and in this world. Taking the easy way out only lets us see what we want to see. It closes our minds and keeps Christ out.

There was a third group with closed minds. They are not specifically mentioned in the verses we read this morning, but they are certainly a part of Mark's gospel. They are the religious leaders, the priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees. They were proud and confident, thinking they already had all the facts. The crowd may have been in a festive mood, but this group was not. Over in Luke's gospel they order Jesus to get the crowd under control. "Tell them to be quiet!" They demand. In John's gospel, they plot together worried that the people will try to make him king.

These religious rulers were conceited, thinking they had all the facts, thinking they knew it all. They were the experts on the Law of Moses. They had a carefully crafted system that was precisely balanced. They did not want Jesus or anyone else tilting that balance. That was why they regarded Jesus as a threat and wanted him out of the way. In just a few verses after our story, Mark tells us that they were plotting to have him killed.

Sometimes those with the most experience are the most mistaken. The United States Parachute Association is the organization that issues licenses to skydivers. They also keep track of accidents and fatalities. What they have discovered is that close to sixty percent of deaths occur among those skydivers with the most experience, having logged two hundred jumps or more. The lowest fatality rate is among the novices. Why? They believe it is overconfidence or pride. The experienced skydivers are certain they know what they are doing. They think they have checked everything, done everything according to safety procedures. They think they have all the facts. Unfortunately, sometimes they are wrong, dead wrong.

So many times when it comes to faith, to having a right relationship with God, we who have the most experience become over confident, even conceited. We are certain we have all the facts and we are wrong. We need to have open minds, willing to receive any truth God has to teach us. We need to be willing to learn from a child, from a teenager, from someone we believe is foolish, from someone we might not like, from any channel that God wants to use. Over confidence and pride keeps us from seeing what we need to see. It closes our minds and keeps Christ out.

So, where are we today? Well, I don't know about you, but at times I find myself in all three groups. I freely admit it. At times I am frightened, scared silly, and I do not want to face up to what should be obvious. There are too many times when I want whatever is convenient, the easy way out. And then there are times when I am so sure that I am right. I am so confident that I know all that I need to know and I shut out any other possibilities. But no matter which group I happen to be in, the result is the same. My mind is closed and I cannot see what God is about to do. I am totally oblivious to the one who is coming in the name of the Lord.

But the good news is: it doesn't make one bit of difference. No matter what we human beings try to do, when God decides to enter our world, we cannot keep God out. Over in Luke, when the Pharisees complained about the noise, Jesus replied, "If they were silent, the stones would shout out." The good news is that nothing can stop our Lord Jesus Christ. The fear of what might happen, the tendency to take the easy way, even our own stubborn pride cannot stand in the way. It was pointless for the Pharisees to try to shut up the crowd. It was pointless for that Ottoman ruler to brick up the Golden Gate. Human effort cannot block any of God's purposes.

The story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem is good news. Jesus enters the city and changes this world we live in. Jesus was not afraid. He knew very well what lay ahead for him. He knew what he would endure, yet he rode on with courage and determination. Jesus was not interested in taking the easy way. No one has ever had to carry so great a load. Jesus was not proud or over confident. He did not ride into Jerusalem on a mighty warhorse at the head of an army. He came riding on a donkey, in meekness and humility. And so he comes to us, opening everything up; opening our minds, opening our hearts, opening our lives through his love and grace.

It would be nice to jump from the triumphal procession of this morning to the bright sunrise of Easter. But we must not do that. We have to go through this entire week. We have to face the facts of Thursday night and Friday morning. We have to go with our Savior through his suffering, agony and despair, because only then is all made new. Only then we will discover the courage, strength and humility we need to open up. Darkness and death will be defeated. The light breaks through. Everything is open, free and clear. We can take up the song and mean every word, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" It is indeed good news! Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.