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Palm Sunday/Year B/March 29, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Mark 11:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11;
Mark 14:1-15:47.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

The gospel of Mark has frequently been described as a passion narrative with an extended introduction. Throughout their ministry together, Jesus has been talking to his disciples about his impending suffering and death, and they have difficulty understanding or accepting what he is telling them. Today, things are heating up. Palm Sunday is not called the Sunday of the Passion for no reason. We don't put out our red hangings because this is a festive occasion. Red is the color we use for commemorating saints and martyrs. Today Jesus sets a process in motion, from which there is no turning back.

Imagine the tension in Jerusalem that day. What the Bible doesn't clearly tell us, but what historians tell us, is that there are two parades going on at the same time that Passover season in Jerusalem. "One (is) a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus (rides) a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus (is) from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message (is) about the kingdom of God, and his followers (come) from the peasant class." They have traveled about a hundred miles to make this entrance into Jerusalem. We call it Jesus' "triumphal entry." "On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria (enters) Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession (proclaims) the kingdom of God; Pilate's (proclaims) the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that (leads) to Jesus' crucifixion." (Borg and Crossan, The Last

Week, 2) Throngs of Jewish people are coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and the Roman authorities are arriving en masse to make sure there is no trouble. There will certainly be trouble when the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar clash. Those welcoming Jesus into the city are shouting incendiary words—“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” They are saying to any Romans who might be within earshot, “You may be in charge here now, but you aren’t going to be in charge here much longer.”

From the way Mark tells the story, it appears that Jesus is orchestrating a political demonstration. He sets up the scene by sending his disciples ahead of him to acquire the donkey. It doesn’t take a great stretch of the imagination to see Jesus as making a mockery of the other parade. Surely his heart must feel like it is going to pound out of his chest as he enters the city. But, Jesus knows that he is being obedient to God in what he is doing as he enters Jerusalem and directly challenges the powers that be. He has read those powerful words from Isaiah—“The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward...I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint...Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?”

Words like these have given other martyrs the strength to walk into dangerous situations and confront unjust and oppressive systems. Next Saturday will be the 47th anniversary of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Words like these from Isaiah inspired him to fight for years against a system that supported racism, poverty, and the militarism exhibited in the Vietnam War. Three years before Dr. King’s death, a young Episcopal seminarian, Jonathan Daniels, was shot down in Selma, Alabama where he was working for

voting rights with the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity. Daniels tells of his inspiration from the words of the Magnificat, the Song of Mary when she hears that she will be the bearer of the Messiah--words inspired by the prophets.

The question for us on Palm Sunday is, "If we had been in Jerusalem that day when Jesus was making his triumphal entry, which parade would we have been cheering on?" We like to think we would have been along the path of the Jesus parade—one of the loyal followers, supporting the one we believe is the Messiah. Chances are good that we would have been on the other side—fearfully supporting the status quo—thinking this Jesus is only a trouble-maker.

In a sense, we are in Jerusalem every day. We are constantly making choices about who we will serve—where we stand on issues of ultimate concern for the well-being of all—often making decisions based on fear rather than faith—or decisions based on the opinions of others rather than on our own deepest convictions about what Jesus would have us do.

The apostle Paul understands what it takes for Jesus to do what he does that day when he enters Jerusalem. He is able to do it because he has died before he dies. He has "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." Jesus provides us with a perfect model for seeing that our lives are not our own—that we belong to God. As followers of Jesus, our own egos do not define who we are, and, therefore, we don't have to preserve or defend ourselves. We can empty ourselves because Christ defines who we are, and, through loving him, we grow and change into his image. We live inside of Christ—inside of God—and we see ourselves from a different perspective inside that space. It is only inside that space that we can faithfully travel in that parade into Jerusalem. Amen.

