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Mark 11:1-11 & 15:1-39

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

This morning, I want you to imagine that you are standing on a road near the Mount of Olives. It's an area of gently sloping hills and valleys where the land is dry and the air is hot. The landscape is dotted with olive trees. You look over at the next hill directly across the narrow valley and you can see the old city streets of Jerusalem. You have been watching as hundreds of people have descended upon the city for Passover.

As you watch the people crowding the streets you begin to hear off in the distance the sounds of a Roman parade. The sounds are unwelcome to you but you hear them growing stronger as the soldiers begin forming. You can hear drums and the sound of clanking armor. You know Pilate is gathering his men together to ride into city as a powerful show of strength. And make no mistake, it's a visible symbol to the people coming for Passover of who's in charge.

With Rome, always comes the fear of violence and the reality of oppression. And for those living under Rome's thumb, it's the hope for a savior, any savior, who might stand up to the powers of the Empire and deliver you and your family from the day to day struggle to survive.

And as you stand there, noticing the crowds forming in the streets of the city, you turn and see coming from the other direction, a man on a donkey. You know it is Jesus but it's not the Jesus you had expected. You notice a few people walking along beside him waving palm branches shouting "Hosanna, save us."

You look back the other way – the drums are louder, the crowds are bigger, the army is stronger. It's no comparison. And when you turn back to Jesus as he approaches you don't shout "Save Us!" It comes out more like a question, "Save Us?" But we've been waiting for you, Jesus, and this is all you've got?

I want you to take in that moment. The day Jesus enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Imagine, the Romans at one end of the city and Jesus on the other. Walking towards one another.

Now, imagine that you have been waiting for a savior.

You've been living the life described in the Psalm for today as you have been pleading...Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress. My life is spent in sorrow. My strength fails. I am a horror to my neighbors, and object of dread. People are running away from me. I have become a broken vessel. Save me Lord! Save me in your steadfast love.

You have been desperate for help, for a leader to overthrow the cruelty of Rome. You've promised your family that someone would come. You had heard about Jesus and the great works he had been doing. When you heard he was coming you imagined it to be the day of liberation.

Remember our Psalm last week...we talked about the meaning of steadfast – It is translated from a Hebrew word that conveys God's unbreakable bond with God's creation. It reflects the promise that God made with Israel to mutually care for one another, especially in the midst of times of extreme brokenness. It was a promise people believed in. It's a promise you, standing in the middle of that street on this day, believe in.

And, then you look at that humble procession and realize that this is what you get. Jesus on a donkey with some meager palm branches.

No, this isn't what you expected. So, what now?

When I think of Palm Sunday I think of one of these "what now" moments. The moment when your prayers are answered but not in the way you had expected. When life doesn't have simple solutions or clear answers but somehow you have to find the courage to move forward. When the odds seemed stacked against you but you can't turn back. Because to turn back would only prolong the pain and suffering. All you can do is wonder, is that all I've got?

And, then I remember Jesus. He may seem like the most unlikely of saviors – at least on the surface. If you take the moment at face value it would seem as though everything good, everything just, everything merciful would be lost in the moment. I mean – it's Rome we're talking about and this man thinks he can overcome that huge, powerful empire on a donkey?

To be fair, the week ahead doesn't seem to get easier, either. It's full of goodbyes, of betrayals, of death and despair. Because anytime we have to face head on into the painful parts of life, we all know the resolutions don't always come quickly. We know that there will be ups and downs, disappointments and failures along the way. But that's where the image of Christ on that donkey gets me through. It's an improbable victory. An improbable victory that overcomes every obstacle, every doubt, every pain. An improbable victory that no one expected but that everyone received.

So this week, we face this "what now" moment just as Jesus did – with a humble yet determined desire to move beyond the suffering in our midst. With courageous steps forward. With hope and faith and trust in God's steadfast love for us. We don't have to be the strongest, or the most strategic or the most powerful. Palm Sunday reminds us that we just need to be the most willing to turn our lives over to God.

There is a beautiful Franciscan blessing that describes this so well....

"May God bless us with discomfort — discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger — anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless us with tears — tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. And may God bless us with foolishness — enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done."

So today, wave your palm branches and join the procession toward an improbable journey. May God bless the road you walk. Amen.