



"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

Stepping Forward

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11; Philippians 2:1-11

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We rallied like the crowds (except we kept our cloaks on!). Different churches. Different palms. Different worship times and traditions. Episcopalians parading their big Ethiopian Processional Umbrella that could take Mary-Poppins to Mars! It's fun to sing, fling water, and share the blessing of being together. Plans got complicated and some of us got confused when we arrived to an empty sanctuary. Blessings and challenges entwine.

Jesus must have worked a miracle for his parade to go so perfectly! He plans details carefully. Crowds join whole-heartedly. Even the young donkey cooperates without a bray of protest. "Never had he seen such crowds," imagines Mary Oliver. Did he know what would happen? I hope he felt brave, Oliver writes, and loved the man riding lightly upon him, as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped ... forward.ⁱ Of course, Oliver's poem poses a question for us—gathered in joy and pomp, loving a parade. Do we know what's to come? Will we be brave and keep stepping forward in Jesus' way for the world?

It's fun to imitate Jesus' parade. Can we emulate his life? As we begin Holy Week, friends, bear in mind the way to the cross is really about his life before, and our life in Christ after. Clear intention, steady determination in how Jesus loved and served people in hills of Galilee, in homes of rich and poor, in city streets stopped in his tracks. That's why people laud his entry into Jerusalem. That's why we're here. We

know God's love in Christ, or long to know it more. Yes, Jesus brings blessings of joy, hope, the promise of life. Powerful authorities felt challenged, a threat to their way of life. His intimate actions, his personal connections had political consequences.

No doubt. This joyous parade is political. Mark lays it all out. A colt never ridden, cloaks and palm branches, hosannas—it's street theatre enacting the entrance of a conquering hero. Except, he's a different kind of king. It's something like my son's four-year-old Halloween costume. He wanted to be a pirate. Of course, he had no clue what pirates are or do. No Jack Sparrow movies yet. No Blackbeard stories. No skull and crossbones. He was a pirate of love, with some kind of heart on his hat. No plundering and killing, we told him pirates of love give hugs!

More than a pirate parody, Jesus enters Jerusalem as the Prince of Peace. No violent conquest enforced with fear. No assault rifles or semi-automatic pistols. No tanks or missile launchers parading under gunship helicopters or fighter planes. Though Pilate's soldiers looking down and Herod's spies in the crowd surely keep tabs as Jesus parades unarmed, with only coats off people's backs. No great white war horse. As the donkey steps forward what Jesus really cares about and heads for is God's Kingdom—the reign of divine grace, the full commonwealth of peace everywhere.

Faithful Jews in the crowd or hearing Mark tell the story bear in mind Hebrew history. Along that way Jesus' donkey walked, ancient kings resisted conquering armies and rebuilt the temple from rubble. That's the Messiah king people expected again! They'd remember all the times before when God abided with us and God made a way forward where there seemed none. That's what Emmanuel, God-with-us in Jesus is all about from the beginning. Now without hubris and domination. Rather humble courage and compassion. Step by step in his campaign for God's

reign—healing, teaching, embodying Holy Love beyond all boundaries. Jesus parades toward the seat of power just as he lived—an alternative truth and reality. Blessings and challenges entwined.

As Mark rallies us with Jesus, in our minds we face powers of our day—concerns in our personal and communal lives. School shootings, scandals, social media manipulation, budget decisions, the incessant threat of violence and war—Syria, Korea, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ukraine, on and on. Health concerns with serious new realities to face. “The time has come,” the Walrus said (and he quoted in his email), “to talk of many things” ... like about his illness. Or emotional wounds still trying to heal. Job transitions. Chemical addictions. Physical, spiritual, societal powers that take life not unlike Pilate and Herod.

Often we can't imagine what is to happen. Anxiety reigns. We try to feel brave and love the Holy One who rides so lightly, so humbly, so we can lift our feet and step, as we have to, forward toward fullness of God's peace. Yes, it's fun to see our cute children waving palms; and to join along. And friends, Palm Sunday is all about creating a world where kids learn to read and write not duck and hide. A world where all people like you and me have a safe home, basic resources, meaningful purpose, without having to say “me too,” “never again,” “I matter.”

It's personal and political. Blessings and challenges entwine. We laud Jesus' Way, Truth, and Life, God's enduring parade enduring among us. We join people of every affiliation or category of society. Crowds upon crowds longing for God's way of grace to be revealed. God's fullness of joy and peace to feel. And sometimes our stresses and longings, passions and perspectives flare in conflicts among us. Friends, whatever our differences like those we saw in the park this morning, I believe we all want to live faithfully and witness courageously in God's love. I know it from our conversation. I trust it's true, even if I haven't heard it literally from you.

We face troubling issues in culture. And the great problem that plagues us is not that we're too political. We're too bitterly partisan. We need to be more political in the truest sense, that is relational, working together with respect, forbearance, gratitude, compromise. Turn attacks that demonize and dehumanize into compassionate personal relations like Jesus. Intimate personal connections inspiring political action. How we treat persons most beloved to us, at our best, is how we best care about and head for God's Kingdom addressing broadest concerns of culture. For persons ... who are so much more than race or class, education or religion. Persons ... who've been trafficked or abused. Persons ... who have spent time in prison. Persons ... living in poverty or with mental illness or with addiction or with health care needs. Persons ... who live in countries we call enemies.

That's what Paul wanted the Philippians to see and do. They tried live together amid a hostile world, like the powers Jesus faced in Jerusalem. Conflict plagued the congregation, rooted in two opposing positions, two persons he names. If there is cause for encouragement (and there is! Paul infers), have the same mind we know in Christ Jesus. Not a mind full of theology or ideology for intellectual assent and absolutist defense. "Mind" here means to be intent and determined, to take someone's side, espouse someone's cause. Have intention and determination, taking up the cause of Christ, Paul urges us. Unselfishly serving others' interests, emptying ourselves however humanly possible. Have courage to continue God's cause in Jesus in all the relationships we encounter on our way. With family and friends in our homes. With strangers and foreigners, with respectable leaders and suspect characters—all like those Jesus met on his way to God's kingdom.

Friends, blessings and challenges entwine. Harmful powers could threaten to grip us, take our lives, entomb us. This coming week is not for easy promises that all will simply work out well. We know it doesn't always go that way. We know the road to

the cross lies ahead of us. Yes, we have times we want to turn and walk the other way. Still, there is much goodness—no divine grace—in ourselves. In others around us. In this church and our communities.

This past week I visited, as he begins his final journey. He shared again favorite stories. Giving his life to love Jesus at an early Billy Graham's crusade. Loving other people by serving with the YMCA in Ethiopia. A violent coup tried to oust King Haile Selassie. Our friend drove a Land Rover with white crosses on the doors and white flag flying above, filled with desperately needed humanitarian supplies. With the destination city in sight in the distance, suddenly opposing forces opened fire from both sides of the road. Bullets pierced the metal. On this procession they needed more than an umbrella. Opposite of Mary Poppins, they crawled out to find a commander. When he saw who they were, made a personal connection, a flare shot up. And like that donkey hoof long ago, their dusty tire turned. They stepped, as they had to, forward.

“The time has come to talk of many things,” his email began. Amid the candid update about his medical journey, he celebrates: I have experienced glimpses of joy. RESOLUTION: (he concludes) Live one day at a time. Keep looking for joy, and put your trust in Grace.

Dear friends, we know God will make a way where it seems there is none. What will define us? What will shape our witness and way ahead? Real people will know we are Christian by our love! Jesus' love defines us more than domination; guides our witness in all situations!

We step forward as one together in the Spirit, giving our heart to love God in Jesus Christ, as much as giving the hats of gloves and coat off our back, walking for

homelessness or hunger, marching into Bronson Park for every cause symbolized in our waving palms.

We step forward to walk together bravely, humbly, gratefully, compassionately in the face of fear, conflicts, threats. We walk into the hospital or doctor's office, scared to death to be with our daughter, our sister, our friend. We walk into the classroom and board room, out of the rehab center and prison cell with clear intention and steady determination as blessings and challenges entwine

We step forward with Jesus into Holy Week to work together through years ahead until God's reign of peace comes in every place, for every person.

Here's how Paul encourages the Philippians. (3:10-16 and 4:4-9)

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be

made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Mary Oliver, “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey” in *Thirst: Poems* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006).