

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017 – “Let’s Go Down…”

Palm Sunday, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 50:4-9; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 21:1-11

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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There’s an old proverb that reminds us that “God draws straight with crooked lines.” We know that today’s readings push us into the current of a great river, a river that will curve and bend through the days of Holy Week. A river flowing toward the unimaginable triumph of Easter. But, the readings today have one and only one direction: down.

Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly in a procession rich with political significance befitting a messiah; except, of course, for the public relations gaffe of riding a donkey rather than a military stallion. But as soon as the cloaks are retrieved and the branches trampled beyond recognition, the triumph goes awry things begin to spin dangerously toward complete disaster. In a matter of days, the suffering servant will give His back to those who’d beat Him, He will offer His cheek to those who’d pull out His beard, His face to those who insult Him and spit on Him. He will stretch out His hands to those who’d drive nails through them. Those who shouted “hosanna,” will shout “crucify Him!” Those who care about law and order know what to do with His kind; He will be tortured, publicly vilified, executed. He will suffer horribly and die in shame. We want to pass over all this. We want to arrive at and rest in Easter. Unfortunately, there’s no way there except descent. The one way up is down. There’s no way to enter the fullness of the kingdom except through utter emptiness. The only way to exaltation is through abject humility, emptying oneself, surrendering one’s ego completely. There’s no way to hear fully the Good News except through obedience; obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross. The womb of resurrection is the cross. The door to freedom is marked with blood. Fragile humans frantically search for another way, another road, another route. The self, the flesh, the ego, call it what you will. It wants to build up, protecting the fragments of meaning it has shored against its ruin. We fear the blood on the lintel is ours entirely. We seek **any** way out but down. The way down means submitting to the uncertainty (from our point of view) of God’s will. It means loss of control, a way of **unknowing**. It means transformation in loneliness and darkness so complete that it resembles death. Ah, but – irony upon irony – we’d rather stay as we are and be destroyed than be transformed and live. Be careful what you wish for.

Fragile churches and congregations claw desperately, terrified, for another escape. Desperate to survive. We long to build up what’s begun to crumble, protecting the ruins of what we assume to be certain. Refusing to imagine God’s triumph in our communal failure. The way down for us and for our churches means surrendering. Surrendering honor and embracing faithfulness, surrendering growth and embracing discipleship, surrendering power and embracing service. But we’d rather have our churches wither in spasms of desperate retrenchment or trendy irrelevance than be transformed into the living Body of Christ. Ask and you shall receive.

We want to rejoice in Easter without the Passion preferring the empty garden tomb over the bloody cross on a hill. But there’s no other way there for each of us and for our churches. Sorry, but we’re not granted certainty. I guess that’s why, presumably, we must live by faith.

But we do have an exemplar, a shepherd, a guide: **Christ Jesus...“Who, though He was in the form of God – did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...“But 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”**. He suffered. He died. He was buried. Then, the Apostle’s Creed tells us, He descended. He went down to hell. All of this had to happen before He could rise on the third day. And so, brothers and sisters, here’s the thing; What if we were to truly and fully enter into Holy Week...? The whole story of Jesus’ walk to the cross? What if we were to spend, as they say, a little time at the cross...? What if we were to give more than a passing glance, more than just a moment or two thinking about its implications...? What it meant for us and for the world...?

In this coming week we’ve a unique opportunity to experience it in wonderfully varied ways; in Word, sacrament and deed, In solidarity with our fellow Christians with every molecule and atom of this beautiful broken world. Sure, everybody loves a parade, but have you ever seen what is often left in its wake (especially when there are horses or other animals)? To truly appreciate one, we must go behind the scenes. We must encounter the mess, the trash, the smell. We must walk with Jesus. We must – as we surely realize – follow Him, no matter where it leads! So, in this coming week and always, let’s do that. Let’s follow Him. As the old hymn beckons us: Let’s go down, come on down...Down to the river. The river that leads through Holy Week to Easter! Brothers and sisters – may this week bring us new revelations, deeper faith, and a holy discomfort on our way to the empty tomb.

Blessings on each of your journeys!

Amen and amen.