

*The Message of the Cross: Obedience*

Mark 11:1-11

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In my preparation for preaching this week, I read what I think could possibly be the most perfect Palm Sunday sermon. It was preached by the late Fred Craddock, who died earlier this month. Craddock was a Disciples of Christ pastor, a professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and a prolific writer and preacher. His sermons have inspired generations.

In his signature preaching style, Craddock invited his congregation into the process of the sermon, seeing them not as passive recipients of information, but rather as active participants in the sermon process – not simply absorbing what was being said, but actively engaging their minds in the experience of the sermon. Craddock believed that there was a common, universal experience linking preachers and congregations, and that the sermon ought to be a vehicle for tapping into that shared space.

Reading a sermon is rarely the same as hearing one preached, but as I read Craddock's sermon on this morning's Mark text, I found myself smack dab in the middle of a common experience with the great preacher. Midway through his sermon, Craddock confessed, "sometimes reading the Bible makes me feel extremely awkward, like I'm not in tune with what's happening."

I had to stop and read that line again. Have you ever read something and just felt like the writer had somehow gotten inside your head, and was able to express something you felt far better than you ever could? It's happened to me a few times, and it happened when I read that line.

"Sometimes reading the Bible makes me feel extremely awkward." There it was, said by a highly educated, deeply experienced, clearly faithful scholar and preacher. And I thought, if he felt it, then maybe it is okay that I feel it too.

Craddock preached this line in the context of examining the different Gospel accounts of the Palm Sunday processional. If you compare at all four of them, you'll notice fairly quickly that Mark's account is pretty spare. Typical for Mark's gospel, the language is pretty restrained – there's none of the "Behold the King!" or "the stones will cry out" language.

There are no children in the crowd shouting "Hosanna!" and the scene involves the disciples and Jesus, some bystanders and a few other people, but not the whole city of Jerusalem.

Craddock supposes that Mark's restraint might be caused by some unease with the story itself.

"Maybe," he posits, "maybe Mark feels it's a little premature" to celebrate<sup>1</sup>, knowing as he does, as we all do, what is coming. Mark knows where this parade is headed, and it's not to a palace, it's to the cross.

That resonated with me, because that's a struggle I've often wrestled with. The Bible invites us into the intimate spaces in Jesus' life, and tells us what is going to happen, and while that is crucial to our faith development and discipleship, it can make it hard for us sometimes. We read and reread stories to find purpose and comfort for our lives and while knowing the whole story is important for all of us, it can, from time to time, put us in a bit of a strange place.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred. *If Only We Didn't Know*, published in *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 130.

Take today, for example. As great as it is to get caught up in the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday, joining our voices with the crowd shouting Christ's praise, it's easy to also feel awkward about it. Because we know what comes next, and it isn't good.

We want to celebrate, and it feels good shouting "Hosanna!" We love the palm procession and the faces of the children as they sing praises to God. And there is nothing wrong with that- it is a part of our story.

But lurking in the shadows is another part of our story- the darkest part. This day of celebration stands on the threshold of a week of doubt and betrayal, suffering and grief. Unlike in our everyday lives when we can't predict or imagine what is coming in the next week, in our faith life, we know, all too well, what is coming. It is bad. And it colors our celebration.

So why do we do it? Why do we sing "All Glory Laud and Honor" and wave palm branches? Why do the children process and shout "Hosanna"? Why do we celebrate when we know what is coming?

Last fall, the little town of West Jordan, Utah, made national news as its residents banded together to do something quite extraordinary. One of West Jordan's young citizens, 4 year old Ethan Van Leuven, had been diagnosed with leukemia when he was two. After a couple of years of good response to treatments, and just shy of his 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, Ethan's body stopped responding to treatments and his family was told he only had a few weeks left to live.

In the face of such heartbreaking news, his family decided to make the most of the days he had, and so in the space of one week, they pulled off an impressive series of celebrations for the little boy who loved holidays. They moved up their Halloween Trick or Treating, held a birthday parade, and celebrated Christmas Eve and Christmas day.

And they did all of this with the full support and involvement of their community- locals joined in his birthday parade, including a bagpiper and someone dressed as Darth Vader, and all the family's neighbors bought Halloween candy and decorated their homes for Christmas early in Ethan's honor.

They knew what was coming, and it was bad. And still, they celebrated.

The first question of the Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of humankind?" and answers, "humankind's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Our ancestors in the faith knew something important. As hard as it may be to grasp, our primary role in life is not to achieve things or control outcomes or even to avoid suffering. Our primary role is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Not just in the good. Not just on days of celebration like Christmas and Easter, but also in the bad, on days of pain and sorrow like Good Friday.

Celebrating when we know the hard truth is neither naïve nor callous, it is obedient. It is an acknowledgement that the God who created us has a plan that is far greater than any plan we could ever conceive. It is a confession that we are not in charge, and that sometimes we have to do what is asked of us, even if it feels strange. Or confusing. Or awkward.

Think about those two unnamed disciples in this morning's story. Jesus asks them to go into town and find an unriden colt, untie it and bring it to him. And if someone asks them why they are taking a donkey that isn't theirs (in violation of the law, by the way...) they are to say that the Lord needs it and it will be returned. Oh, no problem. Not at all awkward.

But they do it. Mark doesn't tell us that they question Jesus or hesitate to perform such a weird- and illegal- act. No, they just go and find the donkey, and tell the folks who ask what they're doing what Jesus told them to say.

And then Jesus mounts the donkey and begins making his way into the city. And that's the story, isn't it? The parade and the palms and the shouts of "Hosanna!" The culmination of this deliberate journey to Jerusalem?

So why do we need to know that Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to untie a donkey?

Another great preacher, Tom Long, supposes that Mark includes the details of this task given to two disciples to remind us all that, just as Jesus made his triumphal entry not on a regal stallion with a gilded saddle, but rather on a borrowed donkey with a coat across its back, his disciples are not always called to glamorous or high-profile shows of faith, but rather to "humble and routine tasks."<sup>2</sup>

During Christ's ministry on earth, some amazing things happened- he was born to a virgin, and later he performed miracles and walked on water and calmed storms. In a week we will celebrate the greatest miracle of them all.

But it is good to keep in mind that, in order for those things to happen, some pretty mundane things had to happen as well. Meals had to be prepared, and boats had to be maintained. Crowds had to be managed, and transportation secured. Christ's ministry amongst humanity didn't happen outside of the trappings of daily life. It happened in the midst of it.

And just as it is in our daily lives, the smallest details and most routine tasks had to be completed in order for Christ to live out his purpose on earth. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes in our desire to hit the high notes of our faith- to celebrate Christ's coming at Christmas and his rising at Easter, we lose sight of the fact that these things don't happen in a vacuum.

God could have chosen to act alone in creating, redeeming, and sustaining God's creation. God could have used acts of extraordinary power to bring creation under control and obliterate the sin that separates us all. God could have called a time out, reset the field and restarted the clock once everything that was broken had been fixed again.

But God chose not to. God chose to include us-unreliable us- in God's amazing plan of reconciliation and wholeness. It could have happened without us. But it didn't.

Jesus used his disciples to further his ministry. They were an integral part of his work. They didn't always get it right- you might say they didn't often get it right- but still he called upon them to serve at every turn.

And so he does with us.

God invites us into God's redemptive plan, choosing to be God with us, not just God above us. And a part of that plan calls us to obedience, but it is not simply blind obedience, or coerced obedience. It is obedience that recognizes that the one in power has given everything for us, and in return, simply asks that we follow.

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<sup>2</sup> Long, Thomas G. "Donkey Fetchers," *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, p. 18.

Obedience to God means that we do not sit passively by while God works out God's purpose in our midst. It means that we do not assume that, because God is so powerful, good things and bad things are going to happen and we can do nothing in the face of them.

It means that God has chosen to use us in ways big and small to bring about God's intended kingdom of justice, peace and love. It means that we are called to live lives of service to God, not necessarily knowing how our faithfulness and acts of compassion will impact others, but trusting that they will.

And so we find ourselves here today, caught between cries of "Hosanna" and cries of "Crucify him!", wanting to celebrate our Lord and knowing that in just a few days, we will execute him. It would be easy for that to paralyze us.

The reality of the harshness of life can be overwhelming. Left to our own devices, it would be easy to fall apart in the face of the suffering and pain that are evident all around us. We could go too far one way, overindulging in that which makes us feel good in an attempt to dull the pain. Or we could go too far the other way, sinking so far down into the darkness that we can't see a way out.

But obedience to God gives us a third way. It doesn't ask us to forgo celebration, and it doesn't promise us that there will be no darkness. It calls us to take a step forward into the unknown, not because we know where we are going, but because we trust in the one who does.

Just as Jesus was obedient to the will of his father, even when that obedience took him to the cross, we are asked to trust in God's gracious mercy, knowing that in the good times as well as in the bad, God is with us.

Thanks be to God.