

“Kingdom Come”
Isaiah 50:4-9; Philippians 2:5-11;
Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday, April 13, 2014
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

I was imagining being there along the road, wondering what it would be like. I was thinking about the character I've been watching through these scriptures. He started out as the eldest son, and then he was the one who came to Jesus and asked, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "Sell your stuff and follow me," and the young man went away sadly.

Perhaps he's there again alongside the road, watching as Jesus is coming along, as people shout, "Hosanna! Here comes the King of David." Maybe he thought, "I wonder if maybe I should have thrown my lot in with this man. Maybe I should have sold everything and followed him." Maybe he got caught up in the hosannas and joined in, wondering what was happening, but hopeful. After all, he knew in his own life the need he had, the hopes he had for the Jewish people. Having now risen to a rank that he could live in Jerusalem, he was chaffing at the Roman rule, those boundaries on his life, the way they created a certain amount of uncertainty he didn't like. There's a certain risk in thinking that way about the Romans. If only there were a king who would replace them, they could throw the Romans out. That would solve so many of his problems. Maybe then he would figure out how to heal the relationship with his father, deal with his relationships at his own home, really take a look at how much he's letting his wealth shape his life.

Thinking about those things makes me wonder, does he really need the Romans to be thrown out so that he can change his relationship with his father or the relationship with friends? Think of all the relationships we have on a daily basis. If I could just get the world to change, then I could work on my stuff. It feels pretty easy to think that if I could just get the whole world to change—if God would just come and change the world so that it fit my expectations—there wouldn't be any problems.

Indeed, as we think about him coming, who is really being crowned? Are we going to crown a new King of Israel, or is the real hope that we'll crown somebody who will crown me, who will change my life so that I'm the king of it? It is so tempting to simply want God to change the world, to take that Philippians passage and simply jump to the end of it. But, it's an amazing thing to think about what it says at the beginning of the passage. It starts out "Israel, your king is coming..." And then there was that word: humble—and riding on a donkey. Humble. Not to come and change the world to be just the way I might want it to be, but inviting me instead to look through his eyes. He didn't see being equal with God something to hold on to. He humbled himself.

Palm Sunday is always an awkward time because there's a way in which it's wonderful to celebrate Jesus coming into Jerusalem, and we know that Jesus is worth celebrating. But at the point where Jesus is coming into Jerusalem, what's going to happen this week? We celebrate a king that comes in to die. A king who humbles himself and doesn't think being equal with God is something to hold on to. If I felt fairly equal to God, I'm not sure it's something I would want to let go of. There are moments in life when we seem to be riding high and we sure don't want to let go of those. So he invited us to humble ourselves with him.

Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem, not on a big war horse, not as a king coming triumphantly in, but humbly on a donkey, coming into the heart of a people. Jerusalem was the center of the Israelites. It was like their heart. So as we think about him coming in humbly on a donkey, he's coming, after all, on a beast that is used for burdens. We call a donkey a beast of burden, right? So what burdens is Jesus carrying in? What is riding on Jesus, as well as riding on the donkey? What kind of weight does Jesus experience coming in?

As he rides into the heart of a people, what burden does he bring? At least one burden seems to me to be: what is the heart going to be like? Is it a hardened heart? Or is it a heart that's open to the one who comes to show a new way? So much of what this is about is what God would help us see. He comes into Jerusalem to show God's way, to take on a lot of our stuff and to confront it, and to take it with him. We'll get to that later this week.

Think about what he's coming in to do. He's coming in to ask a people to change. Is their heart ready or is it hardened? As I think of it, it's not only the people individually, but it's the people together. What is the heart they have? As we think about what heart they have, what heart do we have?

I think about Jesus coming into our lives, entering in. Does that matter? If it does, what does he ask of us? Do we ever have to change? If I really take a look at my own life, are there things I need to think about? Are there ways of doing things, ways of living, relationships I have that need to be changed? My relationship with God?

He's coming into Jerusalem suggesting he's bringing a change. Initially that's cheered. When it turns out not quite to meet the expectations of the people, at the end of the week he's jeered. It feels hard to me, in the midst of it all, to place myself and wonder if I'm with the cheering crowd and all that means, or do I find it too easy to jeer when it comes to the humility and grace that Christ shows?

It seems to me it's about an entry into our lives and the choice we have to allow God's love and grace in or not. To recognize that it might change us, and change is not always easy. We don't always know where it goes, but we can trust the one who comes.

Christ comes into Jerusalem, into the history of the world, into our church, into our lives, into our hearts.

Let's pray:

Lord, we think about those gates into Jerusalem flung wide for you to come in, but do they know, do they hear, will they accept, and are we any different? Lord, come in. Let us walk with you. Walk ahead of us as we walk into this week and remember how you humbled yourself to meet an unchanging society, to meet death. We look forward to the conquering. Help us remember that it is about us, the mistakes we bear, the struggle we have with change, particularly the change you have brought to our lives. Help us open our hearts to what you do and who you are. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.