

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

Bringing Peace

Back before Jesus was born there was an extraordinary king in Syria. He believed it was his kingly duty to make his Arab / Middle Eastern kingdom more Greek. So wherever he could, he tried to introduce Greek practices, Greek thought, Greek religion into the existing cultures, even using force if necessary.

And he tried to do this in Palestine as well. For awhile he conquered Palestine, and tried to eliminate the Jewish religion and culture altogether. He desecrated the Temple, and made carrying the Torah (scripture) a crime you could be killed for. He actually instituted worship of the Greek god Zeus where Yahweh had been worshiped. He made the courts around the Temple into brothels. He did everything he could to wipe out the Jewish faith.

Then another man came to power - Judas Maccabaeus - and after an amazing career of conquest, he drove the Syrian king out. Judas then repurified and reconsecrated the Temple. This is the event which our Jewish friends celebrate at Hanukkah. And as was their practice - they wrote a song to commemorate that great day of purification - of returning the Temple to its God-given purpose - and in celebration of the battle that Judas Maccabaeus had won.

Here's how the song goes - the words, that is, as we don't know how the tune would have gone.

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever. (Psalm 118, sel. verses)*

And this is the song the crowds sang as Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. It is a conqueror's Psalm. Because what the people wanted was a conqueror.

When Jesus came into the city that day, the people who had been hanging out with him hearing him teach and preach, watching him heal and work miracles like turning water into wine and multiplying food so that all could eat,

who had heard story after story of God turning situations on their head
suggesting that the meek will inherit the earth,
and those who are grieving will be comforted,
and that those who think they are great really aren't
who didn't just hear him talk about these things,
but saw him share meals with criminals,
and gather children on his knee,
and forgive the unforgivable,
and cry with his friends,

and outwit the religious professionals...

After three years of all this, they still thought he was the leader of a political revolution to overthrow the government and institute a new order in the land that would favor the Israelites.

And in their defense, the people were simply doing what they knew to do.... And so their coats went down, they grabbed the closest palm branches to wave in honor and celebration of the coming "king," and they sang a victory song.

Us too...We also want a conqueror! We do our best with what we have at hand. Given the situation we're in and the resources available to us. Right? We can only work with what we've got, after all.

But then something happens that requires all our attention and energy - a laser focus to the exception of anything else - our world shrinks down to the essentials.

Lord save us - Lord give us success!

And he does. He shows up - but riding on - of all things - a donkey!
Which actually sounds more strange to us than it would have in Jesus' time.

Animals - chariots - carts - were the norm of course - especially for royalty.
And the donkey, in particular, spoke volumes. You see back then, the donkey was the beast of kings. When a king would approach a city riding on a donkey, it meant he was coming in peace. And by choosing the foal of a donkey, Jesus shows us what his Kingdom is really all about.

Boy I wonder what Jesus was thinking when he saw the little parade as he made his way into the city. He knew what was ahead for him that week - though they didn't.

They shouted in praise - as he was about to lose everything.
They shouted "save us" - as he himself headed into death.

I wonder if he had that pit - that sick feeling in his stomach - you know, when you know something bad is about to happen and you can't do anything to stop it...

They don't even know the irony of their cry for Jesus to save them! But still the cry is real - authentic - genuine. They do need a Savior! And so do we! Because life - some of the time? much of the time? is heavy! too much even!

And while we probably want our situations to change:
For the cancer to be benign,
For the fighting to stop,
For a few more hours in the week to get everything done.

What we get instead is the Prince of Peace, who rides not only into Jerusalem, but into our hearts.

We get the promise of God's presence amidst the craziness.
We get the Holy Spirit who blows into our lives in unexpected ways:
A chance meeting with a friend you haven't seen for ages,
A meeting is cancelled and your day becomes manageable,
The just right Bible verse appears in your facebook newsfeed,
A kind word from the cashier at the store.

Jesus' riding on a donkey.... And bringing peace.

The phrase "beast of burden" did not appear until the 18th century, but is still an apt association here... because in carrying Jesus into Jerusalem the donkey is indeed carrying a great weight and burden, taking Jesus on the first leg of his journey to the cross.

And Jesus himself also carries a great weight and burden. The weight of the world in fact - literally - the burden of all humanity goes with him.....

YOUR burdens....

Your worries for your children...go with him

The grief that won't heal...goes with him

The failure from years ago that you just can't shake...goes with him

The shame that burns white hot, that no one else sees...goes with him

The fear that has no name...goes with him

The thing that you are convinced is unforgivable...goes with him

And with him....it will all be crucified...killed

And just as Jesus gets a resurrection body - so will everything that goes to the cross with him.

And like Jesus - we may have to go through hell to get it... And you know what they say when you're going through hell.... ? Keep going!

Jesus does institute a new world order... And bring about peace...

It just may not look like we expect it to look.

Amen.