

Scripture:

Mark 11:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’” 4 They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, 5 some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” 6 They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. 7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” 10 “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Sermon:

In Mark’s gospel, it is but a moment, a moment where it all came together. And I bet for those who were there, no one could forget it.

Here in Stockbridge, I had a moment that I will never be able to forget. It was a singular moment that came suddenly, and the whole world stopped, even though I kept walking. It happened on Ice Glen Road. I was pushing Jake in a stroller. The sun was high in a perfect blue sky. And the panorama – well, if you’ve ever walked on Ice Glen Road, you know, right? – breathtaking. Even that seemingly endless din from Route 7 seemed to be swallowed up in that moment. It was one moment where life felt fully present. Complete. Whole. I was content with everything, literally everything – family, job, breath, life, what was and what is in that very moment. There was no room for any worry about what stresses might be coming down the road in the week to follow. For everything simply was in that moment. And I seemed to be part of everything in that moment. It was wonderful. It was perfect, even. And it was enough, even though it lasted but the blink of an eye. Nothing could or did get in the way, even if time kept marching right by.

For those people in that moment in Jerusalem on this day we remember, their world, their lives, their holy city, all of it was occupied, dominated by nothing short of the Roman Empire itself. The day before this procession of palms and donkeys, came stomping legions of horses in the other gate. It happened every year at Passover, just so Rome could remind people who was in charge. Instead of a donkey, there were war stallions laden with bulking soldiers. In their hands, they carried gleaming weapons of power and death. It was all designed on that day of Passover, that celebration of deliverance, to drive home the point of who had been in charge in Jerusalem (or at least so they thought) for almost a full century by the time Jesus came on the scene. And Rome expected to be in charge for centuries yet to come.

In the days to come after this brief moment, there would be a flurry of activity for everyone. For the soldiers trying to keep the peace, and for the faithful who had gathered for that great festival of Passover, the festival of deliverance, of remembrance of how God delivered them from another empire. Jerusalem, you see, was abuzz.

Yet for those on the street, it was a moment. A moment I believe none of them would ever forget. A wonderful moment. A perfect moment. A moment where nothing could or did get in the way. Let us stay in this moment. Let us linger and hold onto it, even if time and Holy Week beckons. Even if our pilgrimage is not yet done.

At this moment in Jerusalem, it had been about 33 years since the angels had filled the skies in tiny Bethlehem, proclaiming that birth to the shepherds. It had been just about three years since Jesus had called fishermen from the forgotten lakes of Galilee to drop their nets and follow, and help grow this movement, this way of life. Three years, Mark tells us, of seemingly perpetual motion, of constant action, of endless healing, and of making connections.

Until, as Mark reports in our reading today, it all came together. The crowds grew, the townspeople gave away their precious donkey, and the bold threw down palms and their very garments, too. It was this moment where despite everything else the focus flew to the one on the back of the donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah regarding the coming of the Messiah -- the One who would change everything -- from the line of David.

And I think for this moment, for that one moment -- because Mark doesn't let it linger -- I think it was enough. The people who were there proclaimed their solidarity. They shouted their joy. They allowed their hope not just to bubble up but to overflow. Will you allow the same to happen? It was enough. The world, even in Mark's gospel, I believe comes to a screeching halt in this moment, even if only the barest or tiniest fraction of a second before they all keep going. But it is enough.

Those people shouted about David. They clamored for kingdom and restoration. And yet, on those streets, from those people, I think they were using ancient words to call for something that Jesus showed them would be very different. I think something deeper. Because those who were on the streets had followed and they had seen. Those on the streets had listened and heard. Those on the streets had opened their hearts and believed. They had dedicated their life to this One. I imagine they were shouting "Hosanna" for something far stronger than stone walls or even gleaming centurions. They were shouting "Hosanna" for something much more enduring than any empire.

Yes, they would have known the story of their people by heart, beset and besieged by more empires and kings than your hands have fingers. That was the very reason they were in Jerusalem. They had remembered that God does indeed deliver. Those people knew empires come and go. They knew gleaming weapons fade and dull. But they knew, I think, from their own personal experience that God's word, God's promise, God's covenant of love for God and neighbor, of light shining in darkness, of heavens tearing open, of bread raining down from heaven -- that's what endures. Because I think the people on the street knew it, not just by story, but by experience.

Mark doesn't say so, and I may just be imagining this, but in my heart of hearts and in my imagination, do you know who besides those twelve I think were on the streets of Jerusalem that day? That leper from chapter 1 who found healing of skin and community, I think he was there. That paralyzed one from chapter 2, I think he got up and came running to those streets. The one whose hand was frozen in chapter 3, I think that person couldn't believe how they could grip a palm and wave it. The woman who had suffered hemorrhaging for twelve long years, I know she was there. And the daughter of Jairus, remember how Jesus raised her from the dead? That girl was skipping along with life. The one who could not hear in chapter 7 and Jesus cured him, he was there. The blind man of Bethsaida in chapter 8, he was there. You know who else was there? I think the parents and the kids who were fed from those loaves and fishes, I think they were there. And because of those experiences, personal and profound as well as cosmic and divine, they were there because of what they had seen. They and their loved ones had found wholeness in the midst of difficulty.

I think for those people in that moment that Jesus passed by, when they looked him in the eyes, I think everything was whole and complete. The kingdom – no, Mark Miller gets it right – the kingdom was visible to them. It was incarnate. It was right before them. Everything had been turned right side up. And I think they were able to let go of their human cultural dreams of autonomy and power and nation for that moment when everything came together in such bigger ways, and where they were part of something so much bigger.

I bet the whole world stopped, just like it did on Ice Glen Road. I think they had no choice but to cry "Hosanna." Whether reflexively, spontaneously, beyond any rational choice, simply because of the truth in their heart, or whether they were testifying, and trying to get the attention of those who weren't watching, those who weren't waving, those who hadn't yet believed, to tell them: Look, this is what you need to see. This is what you need to follow. I can't prove any of that. But you know what? I know it in my heart.

And Mark, I love Mark, but man, the guy doesn't linger for even a moment. In the next verse, he has Jesus going to the Temple, looking at everything else in the city, and going to bed in Bethany. There was no time in Mark's gospel to linger. The question for us this morning is: Will we?

Do you remember Transfiguration Sunday? The Sunday before this whole season of Lent started? I kind of disagreed with Jesus for a moment there. Dangerous thing to do. I told you to stay up on that mountain. Do you remember? I told you to stay up there to take the big picture in, so that you'd be prepared for this Lenten journey. I hope you did. And now as our pilgrimage is drawing to a close, will we linger here long enough to allow the moment of all that's gone before to come together for us? To let it come to us, like that moment on Ice Glen Road, until we let go of what we think we need, what we think this church needs, or even what the world needs, and simply let the full impact of this day, who is on that donkey, and why it matters, instead come to us. So that this moment might be truly wonderful, maybe even perfect, and that nothing gets in the way. And then maybe we will shout "Hosanna" at the top of our lungs, not just here, but out on the streets, too.

Friends, time kept going. That donkey kept walking, and with it both Jesus and the crowds. But on this day, let the moment come to you. Instead, stay right here, that everything you found on this pilgrimage might swirl together and become something new, a treasure to keep.

That moment on Ice Glen Road, it's a treasure beyond what I can explain. I have had some incredible encounters with God in real and spectacular ways. But that moment, wow, is one where it was shown to me that all is indeed well, and going to be well. And all is enough and good, and in fact, very good. In moments of trial and tribulation like the ones coming this Holy Week, I often look back at that moment, not to try to recreate it but to remember it. And to remember that such moments come when we linger long enough, when we let go enough, when we open ourselves wide enough to let them come of their own accord, even and especially when we least expect it. Just like for those people in Jerusalem watching Jesus ride in on a humble donkey colt in the midst of the throngs of life.

I promise you, this moment will carry us through the truth of Holy Week, and all the way to the triumph of Easter. And the truth of our lives will carry us all the way through any challenges we face to our glorious end, too.

On this day, linger. All glory, laud and honor, indeed. Amen.