Mark 11:1-11

11When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples2and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.3If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” ’4They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it,5some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’6They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.7Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.8Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.9Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
‘Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Mark 15:1-15

15As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.2Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ He answered him, ‘You say so.’3Then the chief priests accused him of many things.4Pilate asked him again, ‘Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.’5But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

6 Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.7Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.8So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.9Then he answered them, ‘Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’10For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.11But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.12Pilate spoke to them again, ‘Then what do you wish me to do\* with the man you call\* the King of the Jews?’13They shouted back, ‘Crucify him!’14Pilate asked them, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Crucify him!’15So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Our King Comes Humbly

When I was growing up, I remember celebrating Palm Sunday, but never Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday. I assumed that the modern church had added the “Passion” to the Palm on this particular Sunday because of low church attendance on Good Friday – the logic being that if you go right from Palm Sunday worship service to Easter worship service, you’ll miss the irony of Palm Sunday and fail to fully appreciate Resurrection Sunday (Easter). While I believe rationale is correct, I learned that Palm/Passion Sunday was actually an ancient practice that was discontinued sometime in the Middle Ages and has only recently been re-implemented into the church calendar. A long time ago, people who wished to join the church went through three years of preparation, learning how to pray, how to hear God’s word, how to serve others, and how to resist temptation. In the final year, beginning with Lent, Christians who already belonged to the Church joined with those still preparing to join in a more intense period of preparation, with fasting and vigils and penance. Palm/Passion Sunday marked the end of the end of the three year preparation period and involved even greater spiritual exercise. Church members would pray and fast and encourage the new candidates as they came to the end of their training. By Easter Sunday, those who were ready to join the church vowed to resist evil of every form, accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord, and committed themselves to the service of God and Christ’s Church. We can be pretty certain that after three years of discipline, these new converts made these vows with conviction.

Sometime in the Middle Ages, this three year term of candidacy was abandoned. Lent became a time for *all* Christians for self-reflection, repentance, and re-commitment. Somehow it was transformed from a time of mutual support and community cohesion to a time of individual spiritual exercise. The focus had shifted from helping others to become disciples to simply disciplining ourselves. Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday was reduced to Palm Sunday only. As far as those who sought to join the church, the emphasis on training gradually shifted from discipleship to doctrine. I remember my confirmation process being mostly about memorizing books of the Bible and commandments but not so much about prayer or service or resisting temptation. After two years of weekly classes (with summers off), I stood before the pastor and made my vows, but they were empty vows. I couldn’t say “no” with my entire family smiling at me from the pews, but I hardly knew what it entailed to commit myself to Christ and the Church. But by giving the right answer I seemed to please everyone, and felt embraced by the church. If this is what it was like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, I figured I could handle it.

I guess you could say that it felt like Palm Sunday on my Confirmation Day. Being with Jesus amidst all the fanfare, the joy, the celebration. I felt like Peter or John or Andrew might have felt on Palm Sunday, accompanying Jesus into Jerusalem with folks waving palms, singing “Hosanna” God’s favor seemed to be upon me. But was I prepared to accompany Jesus for the next five days? Could I stand by him in the temple court, or in front of Pontus Pilate? Could I walk beside him to Calvary? I had no training as a disciple. I could walk with Rock Star Jesus, but not Quiet Jesus who amazed Pilate by not responding to charges made against him. I could see myself riding in a limo waving to the cheering crowd, not digging my own grave and being spit upon. I could picture myself in the luxurious palace, but not in the cold, dark tomb. About the most torture I could endure was going to church and *trying* to listen to people three times my age explain a book that was 200 times my age. And I only endured that for a short while – I stopped attending church altogether in my late teens.

Somewhere along the line, the church had lost its focus on discipline as apparent church divisions caused the emphasis to shift to doctrine, and for a thirteen-year-old, there wasn’t much interest in that. Without any discipline, I was not prepared to walk with Jesus from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, and it seems that no one was there to help me in my discipleship. Consequently I found nothing important about Palm Sunday or Easter, and remained apart from the church for many years.

Good Friday is the key to understanding both Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday; without the crucifixion. When Jesus entered Jerusalem to the jubilant crowd, there was an air of irony to the whole scene. The king rode not on horseback, or in a chariot, but on a mule. Jesus most certainly was a king, the greatest king that we could ever desire, but his kingdom took on a far different form than what the crowd expected. They were hoping for a new David, a George Washington of Judea. Someone who would straighten out the corrupt religious/political leaders and expel the occupying army. If Jesus had met their expectations, what would we celebrate today? If there were a holiday commemorating Palm Sunday, it would have been like an Israeli Fourth of July, locally celebrated but hardly known outside of the region.

And what would Easter be if it was only about a resurrection, God bringing his Son back from the grave? We might be awestruck by God’s miraculous powers, but what would we really know about God besides his power? Not much. We might even grow angry with this God who seems so far detached from our suffering. “God, how could you allow such terrible things to happen? You don’t know what I’m going through!”

Good Friday informs us that God *does* know what we’re going through. Good Friday shows us that God partakes of our suffering. We may never have an adequate answer as to *why* there is so much suffering in the world, but the cross of Jesus tells us that our God endures our suffering with us. He goes before us to the cross, he goes with us in life, and he comes after us when our time here is complete.

God proves his love to us by enduring suffering with us. How, though, do we prove our love to God? *Be becoming disciples!* Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” In a nutshell, those commandments are to love God, neighbor, and enemy. How do we demonstrate our love? By our actions, worshiping God for who he is, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, being a voice for those are not being heard, standing in solidarity with the oppressed, and making disciples. None of these activities have much to do with personal piety but rather involve community building, *kingdom* building. When I was in the Army, I trained for an Expert Infantry Badge (EIB). The testing took about a week and involved a whole battery of tests culminating in a long road march with a heavy rucksack. Anyone who has ever served in the military knows that the theme of all your training is teamwork. We learned to think as a unit. We were trained to do what was best for the unit. Everything was teamwork, even the testing for the EIB. I remember that final road march quite well. What I remember most is how so many members of my own platoon who had already earned their EIB came out to encourage me and others, walking beside us, cheering us on. If those who were testing for the EIB saw someone else from our platoon who was injured or in pain we would help to carry him along the road, one on each side of him. Once some of us had finished the road march, we dropped our ruck sacks and walked back along the road to encourage those who had not yet completed the march. This all came naturally for us, because we had trained for years how to care for one another.

Wouldn’t it be great if the church could function this way? I doubt that many of us would have the faith and strength to walk with Jesus all the way to Calvary, but there are some in every church who go further than others. It’s up to those who are strong to help the wounded, the injured, the discouraged, the doubting. I pray that next week, when we assemble here again for Easter Worship, that you would look around the sanctuary for those who haven’t been here in awhile. Think like the soldier who sees a struggling comrade along the road and do what you can to help that person along. It should be automatic for us, but it won’t be that way initially; it requires training in thinking and working as a single community, as a communion of saints. We have a responsibility for one another. Let us recommit ourselves to discipleship that we may help each other walk along that road from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, and in so doing learn more of God’s great love for us.