

Mark 11: 1-11

SOVEREIGN GOD, YOU HAVE ESTABLISHED YOUR RULE OVER THE HUMAN HEART, NOT BY FORCE BUT BY THE SERVANT EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST. MOVE US BY YOUR SPIRIT TO JOIN THE JOYFUL PROCESSION OF THOSE WHO CONFESS CHRIST JESUS WITH THEIR TONGUES AND PRAISE HIM WITH THEIR LIVES. AMEN.

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN STORIES IN THE BIBLE. JESUS RODE INTO JERUSALEM ON THE BACK OF A DONKEY WHILE THE PEOPLE WAVED PALM BRANCHES AND LAID DOWN THEIR CLOAKS ON THE ROAD. IT IS THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING OF HIS LAST DAYS ON EARTH. OVER THE PAST WEEKS WE'VE HEARD ABOUT THINGS THAT HAPPENED ONCE JESUS ARRIVED IN JERUSALEM. IN THOSE LAST DAYS HE WOULD ANGRILY CLEANSE THE TEMPLE OF ITS COMMERCIAL PRACTICES AND GET HIMSELF IN TROUBLE TALKING OF THE TEMPLE'S FUTURE DESTRUCTION. HE TAUGHT SOME HARD LESSONS ABOUT LIFE AND HE ALSO REMINDED HIS FOLLOWERS TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER. HE WARNED HIS FRIENDS THAT FOLLOWING HIM WOULD BE DIFFICULT. BEFORE WE TRAVEL TOGETHER THE ROAD TO THE CROSS OVER THE NEXT WEEK, WE STEP BACK TO THE STORY OF PALM SUNDAY. AS WE LOOK CLOSELY AT THIS STORY THAT WE TRADITIONALLY CELEBRATE BY WAVING OUR PALM BRANCHES AND SINGING SONGS, I AM ALWAYS A LITTLE CONFUSED IF IT'S A CELEBRATION OR NOT. THE STORY IN MARK BOTH CELEBRATES JESUS' MINISTRY AND PREPARES US FOR HIS JOURNEY TO THE CROSS.

THERE THEY WERE, NEARING THE CITY GATES OF JERUSALEM, JESUS ALONG WITH HIS DISCIPLES. HE HAD SAID WORDS OF WARNING TO THEM ALL ALONG, INDICATING TO THEM THAT WHEN THEY GOT TO JERUSALEM, THERE WOULD BE TROUBLE; HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT HE WAS GOING TO HIS DEATH. JESUS, THEIR GUIDE AND TEACHER, SEEMED TO HAVE A PLAN, THOUGH THEY PROBABLY THOUGHT IT A LITTLE STRANGE. "GO INTO THE VILLAGE, HE SAID, "AND THERE YOU WILL FIND A COLT; UNTIE IT AND BRING IT TO ME." DID THE DISCIPLES HAVE QUIET OBJECTIONS? A COLT? A DONKEY? JESUS, CAN WE NOT BRING YOU AN ARABIAN STALLION, A MORE BATTLE-WORTHY ANIMAL? YOU COULD RIDE HIGH IN THE SADDLE OR BE PULLED IN A CHARIOT. IF THINGS ARE GOING TO GET DIFFICULT IN JERUSALEM, WE COULD AT LEAST MAKE A PROPER ENTRY. BUT THEY WERE A POOR GROUP; THEY HAD LITTLE TO NO MONEY, AND SO THEY FOLLOWED HIS INSTRUCTIONS, UNTIED THE COLT, AND BROUGHT IT TO HIM. THEY STACKED THEIR CLOAKS ON TOP OF IT IN AN EFFORT TO PROP HIM UP AT LEAST A LITTLE HIGHER AND MAKE THEIR RIDE MORE COMFORTABLE.

AS JESUS ENTERED THE TOWN, A FUNNY THING HAPPENED. AS UNIMPRESSIVE AS HE MUST HAVE LOOKED ON THAT DONKEY, THE PEOPLE NOTICED ANYWAY. THEY PULLED LEAVES FROM THE TREES ALONG THE ROAD AND WAVED THEM IN THE AIR. THEY LAID THEIR CLOAKS DOWN IN HIS PATH. THEY SHOUTED "HOSANNA," WHICH MEANS "SAVE US." FOR

WHATEVER REASON, AS HUMBLE AS HE LOOKED, THEY SEEMED TO THINK THAT THIS MAN COULD SAVE THEM, HE COULD HELP THEM WITH THE STRUGGLES AND BURDENS OF THEIR LIVES.

MARTIN LUTHER UNDERSTOOD THE POINT OF THIS ODD SCENE. "HE SITS NOT UPON A PROUD STEED," LUTHER WROTE, "NOT AN ANIMAL OF WAR; NOR DOES HE COME IN GREAT POMP AND POWER, BUT SITTING UPON AN ANIMAL OF PEACE FIT ONLY FOR BURDEN AND LABOR AND A HELP TO MAN. HE INDICATES BY THIS THAT HE COMES NOT TO FRIGHTEN MAN, NOT TO DRIVE OR CRUSH HIM, BUT TO HELP HIM AND CARRY HIS BURDEN FOR MAN."

"HOSANNA," THE PEOPLE SHOUTED. "SAVE US. SAVE US NOW." THEY SOMEHOW KNEW THAT HIS MAN JESUS COULD HELP THEM. AND SO WE SEE THAT IN THE MIDST OF THIS APPARENT CELEBRATION, THIS PARADE WITH THE PALMS, THERE IS A CLEAR IDEA THAT THE PEOPLE NEED SOME SAVING. THEY HAVE BURDENS AND WORRIES. THEY ARE A SUFFERING PEOPLE, AND THEY WELCOME JESUS BECAUSE THEY SENSE THAT HE IS THERE TO HELP THEM FIND SOME LIGHT IN A WORLD THAT OFTEN SEEMS FULL OF DARKNESS.

WHEN THE CROWD BREAKS UP AND THINGS QUIET DOWN, THE STORY OF JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM HAS A POIGNANT ENDING THAT OFTEN GOES UNNOTICED. IN VERSE 11 WE READ JESUS ENTERS THE TEMPLE AND QUIETLY TAKES A LOOK AROUND, ALMOST AS IF TO COLLECT HIS THOUGHTS BEFORE HE ENTERS THE WEEK BEFORE HIM. IT'S ALMOST AS IF THERE'S A SUGGESTION THAT WE SHOULD DO THE SAME. AS IF WHEN WE'RE DONE HERE TODAY, JESUS ENTERS OUR QUIET SANCTUARY AND PREPARES FOR THE WEEK IN FRONT OF HIM.

THE WEEK BEFORE US IS THE DARKEST WEEK IN THE LIFE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH. THIS WEEK WE REMEMBER THE WAY JESUS WENT TO THE CROSS. WE WATCH AS THE CROWD THAT LAID PALMS AT HIS FEET TURN INTO A MOB THAT SHOUTS FOR HIS EXECUTION. WE WATCH AS THE DISCIPLES DESERT HIM ONE BY ONE TO SAVE THEIR OWN SKIN, AND IF WE ARE HONEST WITH OURSELVES, WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE TOO HAVE DESERTED JESUS; WE OURSELVES HAVE ABANDONED GOD'S CALL ON OUR LIVES AT TIMES WHEN IT SEEMS EASIER TO TURN AWAY AND TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES.

IT'S ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL FOR US TO TAKE NOTICE OF THE DARKNESS OF THE WEEK BEFORE US; IF WE DON'T, EASTER DOESN'T MEAN MUCH. THE STORY OF THE EMPTY TOMB AND THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE WHERE DEATH HAS TAKEN PLACES IS A GREAT STORY, BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE MUCH SIGNIFICANCE UNLESS WE TAKE THE TIME TO THINK ABOUT HOW DESPERATELY ALL OF US NEED A STORY OF NEWNESS AND REBIRTH IN OUR LIVES. HOW DESPERATELY WE NEED A SAVIOR.

WE EXIST IN A WORLD AND LIVE LIVES WHERE MANY THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SHOULD BE. WHETHER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE TRAGEDIES OF WARS AROUND THE WORLD AND

POVERTY OR OUR PERSONAL STRUGGLES, THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS IN WHICH WE DON'T GET IT RIGHT HERE IN THE WORLD WHERE GOD HAS PLACED US.

A SEMINARY PROFESSOR USED TO TELL OUR CLASS THAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO BE HONEST ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE WORLD. HE FELT THE CHURCH OFTEN DID A DISSERVICE TO ITS MEMBERS BECAUSE PASTORS GET OVERLY CONCERNED THAT EVERYONE SHOULD LEAVE CHURCH HAPPY AND NOT UPSET, SO IN THE MIDST OF AN IMPERFECT WORLD, PASTORS GIVE PEOPLE A WORSHIP EXPERIENCE THAT FILLS THEIR CUPS AND PUTS SMILES ON EVERY FACE AND SENDS THEM BACK OUT INTO THE WORLD. DO WE FALL INTO THIS TRAP WHEN WE TOO OFTEN TELL THE STORY OF PALM SUNDAY WITH CELEBRATORY SONGS AND PARADE EXCITEMENT? AFRAID TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE PALM SUNDAY STORY BEGINS THE ROAD TO THE CROSS. THE PROBLEM WITH DOING CHURCH THAT WAY IS THAT IT'S A LIE. LIFE IS HARD. AND THE BIBLE DOESN'T CONTAIN EASY ANSWERS ABOUT HOW TO INSTANTLY MAKE IT BETTER. AND A HARSH REALITY ABOUT LIFE IS THAT OFTEN IN ORDER TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THIS WORLD AND OUR PLACE WITHIN IT, WE HAVE TO BE WILLING TO ENDURE SOME DIFFICULTY AND FEEL SOME UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS. IN CHURCH, WE NEED TO READ THE TROUBLING PARTS OF JESUS' STORY, SITTING WITH THEM LONG ENOUGH TO FEEL THE PAIN GOD FEELS IN THE DAYS LEADING UP TO THE CRUCIFIXION. IF WE WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENS TO JESUS ON THE CROSS, WE HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT FOR A WHILE AND LIVE WITH IT LONG ENOUGH FOR IT TO HURT.

THERE'S AN IMPORTANT REALIZATION ABOUT EASTER THAT COMES IF WE ARE WILLING TO MEDITATE FOR A WHILE ON THE PAIN OF THE CROSS. THE GIFT THAT GIVES US ON EASTER IS SOMETHING NONE OF US DESERVE. THE PEOPLE WHO STOOD ON THAT ROAD TO JERUSALEM SHOUTING, "SAVE US, LORD," NEEDED TO BE SAVED, AND SO DO WE. AND IN MOST CASES, THE THING WE MOST NEED TO BE SAVED FROM IS OUR OWN SELVES. WE ARE THE ONES WHO ARE OFTEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WAYS THE WORLD IS NOT AS IT SHOULD BE. WE ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE CREATED SO MUCH OF THE STRIFE AND PAIN IN OUR LIVES AND THE LIVES OF OTHERS. WE HAVE TAKEN THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN US—THE WORLD TO LIVE IN AND OUR VERY LIVES---AND WE HAVE MISUSED GOD'S GIFTS.

JESUS COMES ALONG, RIDING THAT DONKEY, ABSENT ANY OF THE GLORY AND PRETENSE WE SO OFTEN SEEK FOR OURSELVES. JESUS DOES NOT DIE THAT HUMBLE DEATH ON THE CROSS BECAUSE WE HAVE EARNED IT WITH ALL OF OUR GOOD DEEDS; JESUS DIES THAT DEATH TO SHOW US BEYOND A DOUBT THAT EVEN THOUGH WE DON'T DESERVE IT, THERE IS NO DARK PLACE WE WILL EVER BE IN THIS LIFE OR THE NEXT WHERE GOD WILL NOT BE WILLING TO GO WITH US.

THERE'S MUCH TO BE GAINED BY A WILLINGNESS TO SPEND SOME TIME IN DARK PLACES OF JESUS' STORY. ONCE WE'VE BEEN THERE WE CAN APPRECIATE IN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT

WAY THE BRIGHTNESS AND GLORY OF THE EASTER MESSAGE, AND IT'S BECAUSE OF THE POWER OF THAT CONTRAST THAT WE RETELL THE WHOLE STORY, THE DARKNESS AS WELL AS THE LIGHT, EVERY YEAR DURING HOLY WEEK. THIS COMING WEEK WE WILL SHARE COMMUNION AS A REMINDER OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE WITH US, AND ON FRIDAY WE WILL HEAR THE STORY OF JESUS' CRUCIFIXION. EACH NIGHT WE WILL DEPART IN SILENCE.

I PRAY THAT THE DARKNESS OF THIS WEEK YOU WILL COME TO A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF SOME OF THE DARKNESS THAT MAY EXIST IN YOUR OWN LIFE, AND I PRAY THAT YOU WILL SEE THAT THERE IS NO PART OF YOUR LIFE THAT IS SO DARK THAT GOD CANNOT DWELL THERE WITH YOU. WE ARE NOT CALLED HERE TO WORSHIP TO BRING ONLY THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST AND MOST ADMIRABLE PARTS OF OUR LIVES INTO GOD'S PRESENCE. WE ARE CALLED HERE WITH ALL OUR FLAWS, MISTAKES, AND SHORTCOMINGS, AND WE ARE PROMISED THAT WE NEED NOT HIDE ANY OF THAT FROM GOD, FOR GOD CAN STAND THE DARKNESS. GOD WILL TRAVEL WITH US THROUGH ANY DARKNESS LIFE MAY BRING, AND GOD WILL BE THERE TO LIGHT OUR PATH AND SUPPORT US ALONG THE WAY. AND NEXT WEEK WE WILL RETURN TO HEAR OF THE LIGHT CHRIST BRINGS IN THE RESURRECTION, LIGHT TO SPLINTER THE DARKNESS IN OUR LIVES AND OUR WORLD. THANKS BE TO GOD. AMEN.