

March 16, 2008, Palm Sunday
John 12:1-19
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Walking Together

Since I've moved to Brunswick, I've enjoyed our local parades. You see lots of people you know. Often young people are a central part of the parade. They make you smile. And our parades are not too crowded - mostly its people from our own neighborhoods.

In contrast, the flow of people into Jerusalem at the time of Passover would have included enormous crowds of people, including many people who were far from home. Much of the time there would have been jostling and positioning just to stay upright. Indeed, the incoming pilgrims were the parade much of the time. I imagine it's much like the influx a city experiences today in preparation for the Super Bowl.

And the authorities, which in Jesus' time included the religious authorities and the Roman authorities who occupied Palestine, are wondering if things will go smoothly. Will there be trouble? Who's on our "wanted" list this year? It is in this atmosphere that Jesus decides to enter Jerusalem.

Over the centuries many people have depicted this scene through visual art. One such painting is by James Ensor entitled, *Christ Entering Brussels in 1889*. It is a large painting, measuring nearly 81/2 by 14 feet, so as you stand before it you can feel the Palm Sunday parade coming right at you. There is an enormous crowd, complete with military escort pressing right at the front of the

painting. The canvas is full of people. However, as you search the crowd two characters in particular catch your eye. One warms your heart and the other chills it. In the center of the painting, we find Jesus riding on a donkey, coming toward us. He is a relatively small figure in the crowded center. We are observing him from a distance. Then in the lower left corner at the very front of the painting, close at hand, is a figure of a skull with top hat. Death awaits.
(Imaging the Word, V.1, p. 173)

The gospel of John is particularly clear about the complexities of this day in the church year. The joyous celebration of this day, which we call Palm Sunday, where the world is after Jesus in adoration also has embedded in it the reality of grave danger. The religious authorities are also after Jesus, with very different intents. That is why this day is also called Passion Sunday – we can see the foreshadowing of what is to come in the week ahead.

In classic Dickinsonian language, this Sunday is "the best of times and the worst of times." All the world has gone after Jesus – both in adoration and with murderous intent.

In today's scripture, we catch a glimpse of both the best and worst of times in the encounter between Jesus, Mary, and Judas. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is a foreshadowing of Jesus' washing of the disciples feet at the Last Supper.

Both are signs of the servant nature of Jesus' ministry. Judas is offended by the extravagance of Mary's offering. In this story John conveys the tension that is building in Jesus' own group of followers.

Then as Jesus enters Jerusalem, as he and his disciples are walking together into Jerusalem, the people catch wind that Jesus is coming and a great crowd gathers to catch a glimpse of this man whom Lazarus says raised him from the dead. It's like a Ripley's believe it or not. The crowd waves palm branches, shouting, "Hosanna." Originally, Hosanna was a Hebrew invocation addressed to God, meaning, "O save!" It came to be used also as a cry of joyous acclamation. The crowd's cry ends with "The King of Israel!"

This is a challenge to the Roman authorities who are the occupation troops. Is this guy going to stir up the people into an open revolt to take back Jerusalem?

In John's gospel it is at this point that Jesus finds a young donkey and sits on it. In other words, Jesus says 'No' to the crowd's encouragement to be a military Messiah. The donkey is symbolic as a humble beast and there is some evidence that even rulers rode on donkeys in times of peace, in contrast to the horses they rode in times of warfare. This king rides on a donkey's colt. He is the prince of peace – a powerful reminder as we continue to live in a time of warfare.

Jesus and his disciples have been walking together for months and months, talking together, praying together, and observing Jesus' ways of teaching and healing. As they enter Jerusalem for

Passover, now Jesus sets himself apart and climbs on the donkey. He continues to be a part of the celebration but he knows something else lies ahead. I'm not sure he knew exactly what lay ahead, but I'm sure he sensed it was not good. He knew he was entering the valley of the shadow of death. And because we know the story we know that it becomes increasingly difficult in the days ahead for his followers to continue to walk together with him and with one another. It is the same reason we would prefer to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter rather than to walk together through all of Holy Week.

In a reading the other day I came across this observation:

Jesus' awareness of his impending death permeates his actions and can be compared, I believe, to the knowledge held today by the terminally ill... Jesus on Palm Sunday may be likened to the cancer patient who celebrates an anniversary –fully aware of the "lastness" of it all, yet celebrating nonetheless.

(Imagine the Word, V 3, p. 181)

I attended just such an anniversary two weeks ago. Shirley is the mother of a high school classmate of mine, and a long time friend of my mother's. It was Shirley's 80th birthday. She has worked hard, managing her cancer, the last few months to stay alive so she could celebrate. She is the only one of her siblings to make it to 80 and she was determined to do so. And she is a determined person. Although she is now very frail and does not feel well most of the time, she wanted people to come and celebrate with her. Yet, it was also a chance to say goodbye. It was the best of times and the worst of times. Yet, I

was grateful she had given us all a chance to tell her that we appreciate her and that we will miss her.

Often, as we get older we have an increasing awareness of the potential 'lastness' of each celebration, and of the importance of having people who will walk together with us all our days.

That is part of the covenant we shared earlier in the service:

*To walk together as disciples of Jesus...
To sustain one another in all life's
challenges,
joys and sorrows through prayer, love
and fellowship.*

Last week I mentioned that in a congregation this size there is a great need for a multitude of ways to reach out and support one another – and it is impossible for all of that to be handled by staff. I want to say thank you to those of you who already are assisting in this type of ministry - as lay pastoral callers, those retired clergy who are helping with visitation, those who send cards, those who are part of the prayer circle, those of you who include all of us in your daily prayers, those who quietly and consistently reach out to others among us.

This week I've heard from some people who are thinking about ways for them to reach out. Someone else suggested that she would start sending cards to people whom we include in prayers. Some others have spoken to me this week that they would be willing to be visitors, even on short notice. If you are feeling called to help in a ministry of this type, please let me or one of the deacons know.

May we be strengthened to walk together in the best of times and the worst of times trusting in the witness of the one who is
“the king sitting on a donkey's colt.”