

Zechariah 9: 9-11
Philippians 2: 5-11
Matthew 21: 1-17

How Hard It Is to Follow
April 9, 2017, Palm Sunday
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It is so hard to follow Jesus. It always has been. If one does manage to do it, it can mean the follower is motivated by one of two things: either cluelessness or courage. Or maybe some measure of each, at different times. It is interesting to think about how foolishness and courage sometime go hand in hand to create a strange kind of wisdom.

We begin Holy Week today – let’s remember that Palm Sunday is not a festive dress rehearsal for Easter Sunday. There is a hard road between now and Easter morning. We will hear about cowardice, betrayal, sorrow, regret, remorse, politics, religion, violence, and despair. But there is also healing in the Temple, a loving and tender meal in an upper room, there is also a man washing the feet of his friends, there are words of forgiveness and hope. There is the willingness of one man to listen to the crowds sing “Hosanna!” the ancient Hebrew cry for salvation, and then his willingness to give what help he can.

We can know all this, but it is so hard to follow, to stay the course. We use our imaginations, every year, with the help of Scripture, to picture that day in the week before Passover: the day when Jesus decided to fulfill Zechariah’s prophecy and ride a donkey into the holy city. He was speaking, or rather enacting, a language that would be understood by the crowds. They all knew Zechariah’s promise of peace and liberation. Jesus had already drawn attention with his teaching and his amazing signs of power. Within the cheering crowd I imagine that there were different groups. There were the ones who wanted to see more miracles – religious fanatics, of a sort. “One more miracle: then I’ll believe *even more*.” Then there were people who saw Jesus as their chance to get rid of the Romans. “Keep riding that donkey right through the gates, Jesus: we’ll show them who is the rightful ruler here. Save us! Set us free!” Both groups were chanting “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Who were these people in the crowd? They were people who were going to find out just how hard it was to follow: people who would experience the change from being one person cheering in an energized crowd to one person watching a disaster unfold. Once they saw how dangerous it was, most of them managed to find somewhere else to be. I can’t judge them. I don’t need to use much imagination to think of myself, trying to adapt to the needs of the moment, trying to do the work, trying to keep afloat. We all know that it is entirely possible to stand up in the sanctuary and sing about glory, laud and honor to the King one day and walk by a potential Jesus in the guise of a beggar the next. We all know that we can sing “praise and prayer and anthems” one day, then turn around and be judgmental and exclusive and graceless towards our neighbor the next. We all know that we can pray humble prayers of confession one day, then turn around and look for power, advantage and personal benefit the next. Cheering for Jesus in a crowd is pretty easy – whether or not you like to process with palms. It is not that hard to show up and sing hymns for an hour on Sunday mornings. But following Jesus is not about showing up here. It’s about “showing up” and “waking up” and “stepping up” all along the way. Usually, we only do this when we are very brave...or when we just don’t know what we’re getting into.

Palm Sunday throws all this into high relief. The pastor Noelle Damico wrote, *“Our Palm Sunday liturgy lures us into participation in order to condemn us. For it is our very ‘Hosannas!’ that are truly our first words of betrayal of the Jesus we claim to love. ... Our liturgy glorifies the grand mistake. Our shouts of hosanna, proclaim Jesus as the King that he is not. ... This Sunday is called both Palm and Passion Sunday to remind us of how deaf we are to the non-violent message of a humble leader who announces shalom, a just peace to the world. And we are reminded of how, when the Jesus of scripture fails to meet our criteria of what is rational, pragmatic, or fair, when he tells us to love our enemies, when he tells us that the one who would be greatest must be the slave of all, when he turns the other cheek, (we are reminded) that our response is to turn away by either trivializing his call or by warping Jesus’ message into our own agenda.”*

And here’s the dilemma. How will we know when our own agendas lines up with the confusing promise of Palm Sunday? We do our best to follow Jesus’ instructions, as well as those of the prophets. We try do justice, love mercy and walk humbly, to love our neighbor. And in this year, Year A lectionary readings, we hear repeatedly from the prophets about justice and inclusiveness and our treatment of the poor and marginalized, so we bring these issues forward for discernment. We hang banners about what it means to “Be the Church” above our sanctuary door because we are pretty sure that these are the things that Jesus would want. And yet, following is a bit different, isn’t it? It means a kind of courage to imitate someone going to a very humble place – to empty oneself, as Paul’s letter says, to become obedient to the extreme. Even if we do finally discern the message of the Messiah, and separate it from our own needs and opinions, to go beyond cluelessness....it is so hard to follow.

Today we are still subject to all the emotions felt by our ancestors: the need for someone to heal us, the need for someone to entertain us, the need for a really obvious demonstration of power, the need to belong to a crowd. Today, we still find that, in hindsight, some of our enthusiasms were misplaced, or misguided. Today, we still see ways that our human systems are not working, and we long for an alternative.

So Palm Sunday also called Passion Sunday when longer Gospel readings are included to take us to the crucifixion. When we use the word “Passion” in this way, we are not talking about romance: we are using it as a synonym for suffering. We remember the intentional suffering that Jesus knowingly accepts when he arrives rides the donkey into Jerusalem, with shouts and acclaim, and then in a few days is deserted by his friends, arrested, tortured, and executed. We often use the word compassion in our religious discourse. **Compassion** means “suffering with.” Jesus models compassion, suffering with, when he accepts the hard reality of human violence and selfishness and weakness — and yet does not retaliate. He manages to love and forgive and stay with us anyway, emptying violence and death of their power. As Sara Miles says, “His passion is not sentimental, but fierce. It goes all the way.”

It is so hard to follow.

He always walks a little in front of us on the way to Jerusalem. He does not seem scared- but we are all feeling a little apprehensive. When we tried to discourage him, he recognized the devil in our voice, and told us so in no uncertain terms. Then he started walking again, steadily, towards Jerusalem. And he won’t stop there.

He will walk a little in front of us into controversy. He does not seem scared- but we are all feeling a little apprehensive. He will argue with the intelligent, and stop the self-assured in their tracks. He is going to touch people who are disgusting, then upset the bank balances in the sanctuary. Then he is going to weep in public. But he won't stop there.

He is a hard person to follow.

He will walk a little in front of us into Gethsemane. He will not seem scared- but we will all feel a little apprehensive. He will sweat blood and ask God if there is another way. And when God says no, he will take the traitor's kiss, the soldiers spit, and the venom and ridicule of the crowd. And he won't stop there.

He is a hard person to follow.

He will walk a little in front of us towards Golgotha, the place of the skull. He will not seem scared- but we will all feel too terrified to look. He will feel the pain of wood and iron; but more than this, he will feel the weight of all the evil, malice, cruelty and injustice of the world heaped on his shoulders. And he won't stop there. He will not give back evil for evil, or take revenge, or spew out curses. He will not give back the sin of the world, but he will make it visible, revealed for what it is, so that the world, the world that God loves so much, might be healed.

He is a hard person to follow.

He will go a little ahead of us to a place of resurrection. But then...

but then, he will walk a little behind us through the graveyard. He will wait until we realize that he has truly died, broken by the sin of the world, and that we could not follow him to that place...it was just too hard! Then he will come up behind us and say our name, so that we can turn and follow, in his name, ever after.

I close with a prayer by Thomas Merton:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen.