Preparing for Sacrifice

Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016

Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

At first glance, it seems that there are plenty of things in life we can’t prepare for: a sudden storm, an unexpected diagnosis, an accident in the grocery store parking lot, a surprising ending. And while there are always things that take us by surprise, that catch us unawares, that we couldn’t have predicted if our lives depended on it, many things that seem to happen at will, out of the blue, without warning, are actually things we could prepare for if we had given it thought.

A carefully placed umbrella might help you out in that sudden shower, eating well and taking care of our bodies wards off all kinds of medical maladies, checking carefully before we put the car into reverse every single time, not just casually or occasionally, can prevent accidents and most “surprise endings” can be traced back to clues that, had we been tuned into them, would have given us hints to the outcome all along. Things happen, sure, but the more awake and aware and prepared we are for them, the more deeply we can engage them with our whole beings and more prepared to receive the gift they might bring.

Palm Sunday is one such event. This day is one well prepared for. Usually we think about preparation in the season of Advent: preparing for the coming of the Messiah, preparing for the birth of a baby, preparing for the light of the world. But here it is ---preparation, in every single gospel account of this day; preparation—in the final days of Lent, in the beginning of Holy Week, in the beginning of the ending of Jesus’ life.

It is interesting that the other gospel writers give all the same details that we find in Mark. Interesting because Mark is the sparse writer, the one who wastes no words, who gets straight to the point, who does little to embellish or draw out the gospel story. But here Mark takes time, he tells the story fully, completely, he gives us details; the fact that the other writers copy him says just how important it was to them all to record the specifics of what happened that first Palm Sunday.

The story begins with careful detail—preparation, planning ahead. Jesus chooses two disciples, sends them ahead with a plan already carefully laid out: “go immediately into the village ahead of you” he instructs them; waste no time. And “immediately” as you enter, you’ll find an un-ridden colt, “untie it and bring it.” “If anyone asks…” tell them I am the one who needs it and will return it… “immediately”. And, it was just the way he said: the plans had been made. They found the colt where he said it would be. They were asked the questions he said they would be asked. They did as he told them, took the colt, returned to him and it all began.

Jesus planned ahead….*he* set the course in motion from the moment he began to teach and heal and unbind and ignite. He was prepared, not only for this moment outside of Jerusalem, but for all that was to happen this week. It was not a surprise that the religious leaders tightened their scrutiny of him. It was not a shock that his disciples were still uncertain. It was not unpredictable that the same crowd who loved him and shouted his praises today would be the ones calling for his crucifixion just five days later. Jesus planned ahead. He knew what he said and did was outlandish and unheard of; he understood that there would be consequences. He anticipated that inaugurating a reign he called God’s own, in the very midst of the Roman occupation, wouldn’t go unnoticed! And he was not unaware that on the other side of the city on that very same day, another parade was unfolding with warhorses and banners made of rich, fine fabrics proclaiming the power of the occupier. Jesus knew. He was ready. There were no surprises. Palm Sunday was preparation for all that lay just ahead.

And so that got me wondering about our own preparation this week. Throughout the season of Lent Deb and I have been inviting you to think about how things can and will be different when we get to next Sunday and beyond, when we celebrate resurrection, yes, but further down the road when the Search Committee presents you the name of a new pastor and when that person comes. We’ve asked you to prepare yourselves by thinking in new ways about power, trust, vision, understanding, and grace. We’ve sometimes hinted and sometimes said straight out what we think we all need to do to be prepared….and here we are, at the threshold of this holy week…. And what I want to know is, are we ready?

As we hear the shouts of “hosanna” and wave our own palm branches, I am wondering if we are prepared….if *I* am prepared….to follow this crowd into Jerusalem, to stand beside Jesus in the Temple, to stand up for him against the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees and the Romans. I am asking myself, “What is the way I am preparing for the Christ in my own heart, in my own life this week?” Am I clearing a path by which God has access to my life? ( <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/03/14/palm-sunday-where-the-way-leads/#sthash.KbAsmgUb.dpuf>)

You see it is quite one thing to simply follow on impulse and another to be prepared. Those who just pick up and go enjoy the gratification of instant satisfaction; they have acted and are rewarded in the moment. But those who have planned are usually the ones who go the distance, who are ready for whatever may come. Apparently Jesus didn’t just take a chance that there would be a free, available donkey hanging out on the street corner or that he would have permission to “borrow” it when he needed it. He had planned ahead, he had prepared what he needed, he had checked out the itinerary, leaving nothing to chance. And then in verse 11, after he has made it into the city gates, we’re told he goes to the Temple just to get a look at everything happening there---again, scoping out the course, planning ahead! He was making himself ready for all that was to come.

And so I wonder about us, about me. Are we, am I, ready for all that is to come this week? Most likely not. You see, no matter how much I think I am prepared for the betrayals, the shouting, the violence and then the deadly silence of this week, no matter how faithful I am to my Lenten devotions, no matter how familiar I am with the story, it always catches me off guard when I realize that many times—too many times, without realizing it, I participate in all that happens this week because I am *not ready*, I am not prepared, I have not planned to go the distance with Jesus, not to very end, not to death, not to the cross.

The joy of this day is itself the preparation of the death that must happen before we can be ready to begin again. The challenge of this day is to soak in the happy cries of this moment but then to be prepared to keep walking with Jesus the length of the *entire* week. It’s easy to get so caught up in planning for our family celebrations next week that we skip the contemplative, intimate moments of Maundy Thursday. It’s so difficult to bear the re-enactment of the crucifixion that it is almost natural that we would ignore Good Friday, as if passing it by could make it less painful, less tragic, less real. And we Protestants, especially, have never been good at honoring the silence and finality of death that comes on Holy Saturday. To contemplate Jesus’ dead is too much to bear. We use the day to prepare for Easter….a living celebration diminished in power if we don’t first come to terms with death.

So let me go back to the questions: What are you and I doing to make a way for Jesus in our hearts and lives this week? Are we clearing a path to make access for his entry into our own lives? Are we preparing a place for our own resurrection, once we’ve faced the death of who and what we have become? Because we know that newness comes only out of the death of what was; it’s only when we come face to face with our own participation in what holds us back, what causes pain, what diminishes another, what breeds death---that we can be ready to claim new life and resurrection when it comes.

I want to invite you to join me in planning ahead, in moving deliberately through this week. Read your bible: any gospel, any version, and remember what happened in these days. Spend some time, any time, in prayer each day during this week. Join us on Thursday night when together we will read the story of Jesus’ passion once again, and break bread, and drink the cup together. Watch on Good Friday: walk with others from our neighboring churches through our city. Attend part or all of a service of the hours of Jesus’ death. Be aware of the significance of the great, silent Saturday in a new way. Plan to be *present* to the moments of this week. Today is about preparation: a borrowed donkey, waving tree branches, seemingly urgent in nature but carefully, thoughtfully, planned out. Nothing about this week is an accident. Nothing happens that wasn’t anticipated in advance.

Prepare your own heart; prepare your own spirit. To celebrate, to engage, to watch, to eat and drink, to pray and rest, to resist, to hide, to turn away…..for just as it is in our participation in the events of Jesus’ life that allow us to love and serve him, it is our participation in the events of Jesus’ death that allow us to prepare to loose our own lives alongside him in order that we might find them again in his love and sacrifice. “Hosanna! Save now! Blessed is the One who comes!” Palm Sunday is about preparation for the greatest sacrifice, the greatest love ever given: make yourself ready to receive the gift.