

RIDE ON??

Mark 1: 1-11

I don't think there is anything worse than knowing the ending of a story. Some people actually read the last chapter in a book first before reading the book. So, what's the point? Why waste your time or money investing in the book?

Well, that is kind of how I feel about our scripture passage today. We read the Palm Sunday story about the entry into Jerusalem by Jesus and it is kind of ho hum. And in a pandemic year, it is even more ho hum...as we have heard it so many times.

The Grace Covenant Church I attend in Richmond has for years participated in a Palm Sunday parade with nearby churches. They would walk around Monument Avenue stopping at each of the churches with scripture, reading, and singing. They even had a real donkey. And Palm branches.

At least it got you in the mood for the meaning of Palm Sunday. A sense of a festival, crowd, excitement, and anticipation.

That's the whole build up in our passage today. In Mark's Gospel, there are no palm branches being waved. They are only found in John's Gospel. Each of the Gospels has a different focus on their meaning of Palm Sunday:

Matthew's focus is to fulfill the prophet's prophecy.

Luke's focus is to declare the King comes in the name of the Lord.

So, what about Mark's focus? Look with me at the passage.

Most of the eleven verses (7 in total) talk about the preparation of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Only 4 verses are about what happened. I had never noticed the heavy focus about the preparation:

- instruction to the two disciples about the donkey, the colt.
- the message to them if anyone asks why are you taking it
- their journey to the opposite village
- their being asked why are you untying the colt
- their bringing the colt to Jesus and placing garments on it.

A good bit of the introduction in this chapter is about the preparation of Jesus coming into Jerusalem. What is interesting is this preparation was not done at the last minute. It was not happenstance. It was not about being lucky about finding a donkey.

We are told it was planned in advance. Jesus had contacted the owner, and all was set. It was part of the grand plan of God's Kingdom coming into being.

Which causes one to ask the question, "Do you believe in the Providence of God?" Do you believe God has a plan for this world? Do you believe, on a more personal basis, that God has a plan for your life?

In this instance the plan was going to end up in tragedy, suffering, and heartache. With all this planning, Jesus was still going to die. The excitement on Palm Sunday would end up in the local landfill on Good Friday on the Cross of Calvary.

Do you believe God is in charge? Do you believe there is a plan that affects your life and that God is in charge of that?

A little story from my life. I was organizing pastor of the Summit Church in North Stafford County. I was very active in the community. Member and chair of the Stafford County School Board. All was going great. The church was in excess of 600 members. Everything was cooking with gas as they say.

Then along came elected school boards. I decided to run as I had been appointed on two occasions by the School Board Selection Commission. It was all good.

I hated the politicking, and the local Republican Party was after me! I was an instructor in human sexuality in various congregations for middle school youth and their parents. They were very meaningful experiences. False rumors began to circulate that I was in favor of giving condoms to kindergarten kids which was absolutely ludicrous.

Well, the election came, and I got beat like a drum! It was devastating and shocking to a lot of people. I could not figure it out and could not explain it either. It was a very hard and difficult time.

Two months later I was called to be the General Presbyter and Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of the James which I thoroughly enjoyed for over 21 years. If I had won re-election, I would not have been open to the possibility of a call for four more years.

It was a clear signal that someone else was in charge of my life. There was a plan far bigger than I could envision. There was a clear message that all would be right in the world - - at least in my world.

I wish we were together and we could hear similar stories from one another. About the act when you lost your job, it became the best thing to ever happen to you. When you invested in a poor

investment and out of it came a real gift. When in the heartache of heartaches you went through a divorce and yet it was very freeing, and a new life came even out of the sadness.

So, while we fret and worry over how bad things are in life, God is doing a new thing for you. Instead of looking at how negative things are, seek what God is doing in your life. Instead of always seeing the glass half empty, believe that it is half full!

I think I have told this story before about Stella Billson, a 90+ year old English lady in my congregation. She would remind me of her grandmother's wisdom: in everything that happens to you, there is a blessing. Sometimes you have to dig a little to see it.

What if that as our point of view? What if that is how we viewed life? What if in every disappointment, we paused to look for God's blessing? What a difference it would make.

In Palm Sunday there is great excitement and great heartache. But the good news is that God was not done AND God was still in charge!

The other part of this story is the expectations of the crowd. The crowd had an agenda. They were clear they were in need of a king and that is who they were looking for. A person who would come and set things straight. And yet they mis-read the signs.

In that day, a King who is going off to war would ride on a horse, a spirited animal full of energy and domination. A King who was coming in peace would ride a donkey, the foal of an ass. The signs were clear and yet they wanted and expected another kind of a King.

The other point that we miss in the story is that we often mis-read and misunderstand the shouting of "Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." It is a direct quotation from Psalm 118.

We always read the Hosanna as Praise or Adoration. Praise the one who is coming in the name of the Lord!

Yet the word really is translated as SAVE NOW! In other words, the crowd was expecting a person to save them now from the toils and tribulations they were suffering in their daily life. They knew the King needed to be someone who was mighty and strong. Someone who would be determined and would push head long into fixing the problems they faced.

So, their expectations were not met. They sought someone who could meet their expectations and set things straight. However, they had someone who did not meet their expectations.

So, the question to us is what about our expectations? What do we expect of this Jesus? How will we be saved now? What difference will he make in our lives?

People's expectations of Jesus are all over the map. If I pray hard enough, God will give me what I want. When I get in a tight spot, I call on Jesus to get me out of my squeeze. When I cannot figure out what to do, I lean on those everlasting arms hoping for an answer. If I just use religious language like a rabbit-foot or good luck charm, all will work out.

Our picture and expectation of Jesus does not often match up with this Jesus of Nazareth. He comes on the back of a donkey and he comes in peace. He is not about all kind of might and power and domination as we understand that in our world. He is not about making our lives great again. He is not about us being part of a world dominating power and country.

No, he comes in peace with the gifts of the spirit...gentleness, kindness, acceptance, grace, love, forgiveness, peace. None of which is about domination and being strong armed. None of which seeks to be on top of others. None of which forces others to be subservient.

And why? Because the issue is not about me or you. The issue is about God. What is God's will? What is God's plan? How do I fit into that plan instead of trying to force God to fit into my plan?

It is about being submissive to a power and creator far greater than me. Jesus did that. He rode into Jerusalem because he knew that God was in charge. That God had a plan and he, Jesus, was part of that plan.

And while this week in the Garden he will show his clear humanity when he asked that this cup pass from him, he declared that not my will be done, but thy will, O God!

That's the test. That's the message of Palm Sunday. Whose will am I going to follow...regardless of what might happen? My will or God's will?

So the question for us is whether we ride on or not! What are you going to do this Holy Week?