

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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April 9, 2017
Palm / Passion Sunday
Matthew 21:1-11; 27:24-26

In Plain Sight

This year, as we have made our way through the season of Lent, our journey each Sunday has been informed by some of the great events recorded in the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament.

We began, 5 weeks ago, by recalling the ancient legend that speaks of God's creating all of the cosmos and placing human beings in the midst to care for it with sensible stewardship. That very first Lenten Sunday reminded us though of the human characteristic of sinfulness and separation from God when that first man and first woman willfully disobeyed God's commandment by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This seminal story set the stage then for our recalling some of the many stories in which God is reaching out to us to restore that broken relationship and bring about a reconciliation between human beings and their creator. We've been reflecting on a number of them over the last month.

The greatest event of God moving toward the human community with the goal of restoration is the story of Jesus himself. That story culminates with the recollection and celebration of what happened on that first Easter Sunday. And this year, we'll of course be doing that one week from today. I hope you'll be here to join in that greatest celebration of all celebrations.

Today, we rejoin the story of Jesus in this sixth and last Sunday of Lent. This is when we recall Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem—the capital city, the seat of power of the Jewish religion, and the regional seat of government over this part of the Roman empire that included Jerusalem as well as all of Israel. Everything else in the biography of Jesus as we discern it from the four gospels of the New Testament is leading to this arrival in Jerusalem.

For three years Jesus has been traversing the towns, cities and countryside of Palestine. Over this time he has developed quite a following as a result of his teaching, preaching and actions among the people. Not only does he have the 12 disciples who he hand-picked to accompany him, but he has dozens of others who have chosen to follow this most unusual and yet strangely winsome man.

Over this three years, Jesus has also made quite a name for himself, both within the religious culture as well as in the social and political culture. The many people who were directly positively affected by his actions of healing and making whole have spread their awe and wonder over his actions. The even more people who have witnessed Jesus' actions have also spread the word through their family and social networks. And Jesus has come into public confrontations numerous times with the Jewish religious leaders of the time known as the Pharisees, with whom he developed quite a reputation.

Even though there were no newspapers, television and radio networks; even though there were no mass communication networks and social media, Jesus' reputation was such that he was famous or infamous, depending on one's perspective, by the time he arrived in Jerusalem. This fame was either celebrated and cheered, or feared and jeered.

The event that we recall today is what is called the triumphal entry. It's triumphal because Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem by crowds of people who recognize him as a man of God who has come to save. The word hosanna which is what the people shouted is a word that means "save us." Shouting hosanna to Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem was a recognition, by some, of the saving nature of his ministry.

There are two other aspects of his arrival at, and entry into Jerusalem that are worth noting. The first is that he arrives riding on the back of a donkey. This is one way of tempering the triumphal aspect of his entry. He does not arrive as a military or political hero on the back of a magnificent steed, or riding in a chariot pulled by white horses. No. Rather than arriving in a cloud of dust kicked up by a hasty and definitive arrival, he arrives on a plodding donkey who takes all the time in the world to make its way into the city. There is a humility that is represented in the lowliness of this beast of burden. And there is also a patience that is signaled in that there is no hurry or haste associated with Jesus' entry.

So even though Jesus arrives with a hero's welcome by the crowd, thereby lending that triumphal aspect, he does so with humility and steady deliberation.

The other notable aspect of Jesus' arrival and entry into Jerusalem is that he does it in plain sight. This is rather remarkable because those who saw in Jesus a threat to the political and religious establishments might have expected him to stealthily make his way into the city under the cover of darkness and disguise. It perhaps would have seemed more understandable for him to show up unannounced so as to benefit from catching the powers that be by surprise. Furthermore, that he chose not to sneak in, it then would have made more sense, perhaps, for him to have arrived in a flurry of activity with guns drawn so to speak to stake his claim in opposition to those in power.

But he doesn't do either of these. His strategy, if he has one, is something that doesn't appear to make much sense at all. Arriving in plain sight, riding on the back of a humble donkey, exposed and unprotected, at the mercy of those around him—what kind of strategy is that?

Each year, on this Sunday, we make the point that the celebration that is commemorated in the Palm Sunday processional is short-lived and transitory. It's worth noting that following the account of the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem, there are another 6 chapters of Matthew's gospel devoted to this one last week of Jesus' life. And a lot happens in that week that the gospel writers felt compelled to include.

A quick look over the paragraph headings in my Bible gives a sense of this. They include:

- Jesus cleanses the temple.
- Jesus curses the fig tree.
- The question about paying taxes.
- The greatest commandment.
- Jesus denounces the scribes and pharisees.
- The destruction of the temple foretold.

Added to this are a half dozen of Jesus' most well known parables.

Jesus, in his triumphal entry, while not doing so with guns drawn, did come in with a lot to say, and a lot to do, all in the public arena of the capital city. Amidst the bustling crowds of citizens and bureaucrats and politicians and religious elites, Jesus was about his work with definitive exclamation. What Jesus did, he did in plain sight.

In world history, from a western perspective, Jesus was a foundational turning point. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in how we mark time in our western calendar. The past, more than 2000 years ago, time is marked leading up to Jesus. And the last 2000 years, it is marked as since Jesus. This year, 2017, is roughly 2,017 years since the birth of Jesus.

The history-changing significance of Jesus' life and ministry of course is a the result of much more than his being a compelling preacher, effective teacher and successful healer. These qualifications certainly contribute to the overall magnificence of the man. But the *sealer* is in how Jesus in his death and subsequent resurrection overcame everything that divides, separates and alienates. That, of course, is the message we'll hear all about next week. So, stay tuned for that.

The message for today is about *how* Jesus went about it all in plain sight in the days leading up to that last chapter.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem with a public recognition ceremony, complete with palms and hosannas, most everything he did in that week was in public view, including his arrest by the Roman soldiers, his facing the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate who also delivered Jesus' death sentence.

In the time of Jesus, as well as in our own time, those in positions of power and influence do not always deal in the open, do not disclose, do not share, do not operate in plain sight. This screen of secrecy, and shroud of uncertainty are unsettling and can lead to confusion and mistrust. When this happens social and societal cohesion is imperiled.

Jesus, in his last week, in his interactions with political and religious authorities ultimately ends up in custody after being arrested. He is made to appear before these authorities to face charges of heresy and treason. Those charges are brought to him in the open even as he had also operated in the open throughout his ministry that was carried out in plain sight.

The result is that Jesus, at hands of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate is sentenced to death. And not only is the sentence capital punishment, it is execution by crucifixion, a particularly humiliating and excruciating way to die.

This part of the story of Jesus is not easy to bear. It is particularly challenging to ponder and to reflect on. Through the ages, Christians have set aside this week that has as bookends, the story of Palm Sunday and the story of Easter Sunday, as what is called Holy Week. It is a time for somber and sober thinking as we consider the amazing and complete gift that Jesus gives by way of his very life.

Like every other aspect of his life, Jesus' arrest, trial, flogging and death on the cross are all in full view, in plain sight. The gospel writers provide incredible detail of these events so that we who follow will be as fully aware today as they were then of the full extent of Jesus' actions for us.

I invite you this week to enter in to the fullness of our commemorations of this amazing gift of God in Jesus. For as deep as is the darkness into which we will descend, the height and breadth of the Easter good news will not just be commensurate in intensity, but infinitely more so.