

Following the Footsteps of Jesus to Jerusalem

Shepherd's Grace Church

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²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out. (Luke 19: 28-40) (Also Read Psalm 118: 18-28)

Have you ever wanted to change a story? Have you ever wanted to re-write a movie so the ending suited your mood, or maybe your purpose? As we celebrate Palm Sunday today knowing the events that are to unfold this week for Jesus, knowing the footsteps we will have to follow, I am tempted to re-write the events even of this day! How might the events unfold differently if we changed even one circumstance! In one of the devotions I wrote earlier this week I invited us to consider together the actions of Lazarus in welcoming even Judas into his home. The author of John's gospel was not very kind to Judas in last week's story, accusing him of being a thief and a betrayer. I encouraged you to wonder with me at what might have happened if any of us had befriended Judas; if even one of us had befriended him! We followed Jesus to the table, we were there, we had the opportunity but not one of us reached out to this man. How might the world have been changed if we had?

In an e-mail I recently received, There was this little girl sitting by herself in the park. Everyone passed by her and never stopped to see why she looked so sad.

Dressed in a worn pink dress, barefoot and dirty, the girl just sat and watched the people go by..

She never tried to speak.

She never said a word.

Many people passed by her, but no one would stop.

The next day I decided to go back to the park in curiosity to see if the little girl would still be there.

Yes, she was there, right in the very spot where she was yesterday, and still with the same sad look in her eyes.

Today, I was to make my own move and walk over to the little girl.

For as we all know, a park full of strange people is not a place for young children to play alone.

As I got closer I could see the back of the little girl's dress. It was grotesquely shaped.

I figured that was the reason people just passed by and made no effort to speak to her. Deformities are a low blow to our society and, heaven forbid if you make a step toward assisting someone who is different.

As I got closer, the little girl lowered her eyes slightly to avoid my intent stare.

As I approached her, I could see the shape of her back more clearly.

She was grotesquely shaped in a humped over form.

I smiled to let her know it was OK; I was there to help, to talk.

I sat down beside her and opened with a simple, 'Hello'.

The little girl acted shocked, and stammered a 'hi ' after a long stare into my eyes.

I smiled and she shyly smiled back.

We talked until darkness fell and the park was completely empty.

I asked the girl why she was so sad.

The little girl looked at me with a sad face said, 'Because, I'm Different...'

I immediately said, 'That you are!', and smiled.

The little girl acted even sadder and said, 'I know.'

'Little girl,' I said, 'you remind me of an angel, sweet and innocent.'

She looked at me and smiled, then slowly she got to her feet and said, 'Really?'

'Yes, you're like a little Guardian Angel sent to watch over all the people walking by.'

She nodded her head yes, and smiled.

With that she opened the back of her pink dress and allowed her Wings to spread, then she said 'I am.'

'I am your Guardian Angel,' with a twinkle in her eye.

I was speechless -- sure I was seeing things.

She said, 'For once you thought of someone other than yourself.

My job here is done'.

I got to my feet and said, 'Wait, why did no one stop to help an Angel?'

She looked at me, smiled, and said, 'You're the only one that could see me,' and then she was gone.

We have come so far in the last 6 weeks. Easter is almost here and Lent nearly over and as we stand this morning on the Mount of Olives we can look back and we can look forward; seeing both what has been and what will be as we “follow the footsteps of Jesus” this last week! Before we begin our journey down the hill, for the path down the Mount of Olives is not very steep, I invite you to pause with me. What have we seen this year on our journey?

On the side of the mountain where Jesus taught us to pray did we notice the young woman and two children standing shoved to the side by those with more power and influence than her? When we traveled into the wilderness did we notice the man wearing tattered clothes who had slept the night on the rolled up bedding tucked behind a prominent rock? What do you think he had for supper that evening? When we entered the Synagogue did we notice the young couple praying fervently on the back bench? Their young child is suffering from an incurable illness and they are in desperate need of a miracle! When we followed Jesus to the lakeshore did we notice the boats just beyond the horizon

stranded in the storm. They would be tossed to the point of capsizing. Men would be flung over the edge and into the water. They would have cried out for help! When we came to the table where we were eating with sinners and Pharisees where did we seek to sit? When we came to Bethany last week did we notice Judas? How might the course of events of this week be changed if any of us had reached out to Judas last week? How has your life been changed during Lent? How has the life of our congregation been changed?

The little girl in the pink dress sat unnoticed. The person who saw her assumed it was because of her deformity, her difference! It was a natural assumption. We often find ourselves put off by the appearance of others. Lent is a challenge to these perceptions! Lent encourages us in our difficulty to recognize that others have similar difficulties. Our struggle however is the same as the one identified by the angel. So often we are so caught up in our own struggles and strife that we simply do not make time for the struggles of others. If we want to change the Palm Sunday Story, we will need to recognize those who struggle with us!

As we stand on the top of the Mount of Olives this morning, I invite you to look back for just a minute. I invite you to think of all we might have missed together. Now, I invite you to know that Jesus missed none of it! He saw each and every act of suffering and struggle. Among the crowd joining us this morning are those who are hungry, those who are cold and naked, those who are struggling with life-threatening issues! Jesus saw them, spoke to them, shared life with them and they, like us followed Him along the way. We have been so caught up in our own issues and our own busy lives that we have forgotten to notice how many have joined us.

Together with them we make a triumphal procession this morning! While we may have missed the opportunities of the past to minister to one another, we have still more opportunities in the present and in the future. Come! Let's walk together down the mount of olives, into Jerusalem, into a future that God is preparing for us! Together, let us follow the footsteps of Jesus as He makes this final part of His journey! As we begin, let us remember the words of the psalmist this morning. " I will enter his courts with thanksgiving in my heart, I will enter His courts with praise! I will say this is a day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice for He has made me glad! Let us also ask the question, "How can this Easter be different? How might we re-write the story?"

There is an excitement in the air as we begin this day! You know the feeling. It is the same feeling you experience when you get ready for a trip you have looked forward to for awhile. If you don't travel, it is the same feeling you experience as you anticipate a family member's or a good friend's arrival at your home. There is an eagerness, a sense of urgency, a longing to leave. The feeling is contagious. Not only do you experience it, but you sense it in the rest of the crowd! The feeling creates a tension that is almost visible.

I used to notice this kind of tension when we were preparing to travel with my parents to my grandparents house in Oklahoma City. We would all be scurrying around to get packed, get the car loaded and get on the road! Because of our eagerness, we were often short with one another, frustrated because the work of packing was not finished. Then, just as we were getting ready to load up

and leave it seemed like the phone would always ring. The phone ringing around our house was not always a sound of celebration. My father's office was in the home and when the phone rang as we were on our way out of town it was usually because a patient was calling.

My brothers and I, eager to get on the road, anxious to get to our grandparents house would audibly groan at the sound. My mom would glare at my dad with that "Here we go again look!" and all of us would beg my dad not to answer. Dad however knew what you and I have just learned this Lenten season. There are many in need. He always seemed to understand that we should look around and reach out to others. I might have wanted to change the story of our weekend adventure by choosing to walk out the door and getting the show on the road. My dad however always answered the phone! He answered and we waited. We waited while he cared for others!

So here we stand this morning, still at the top of the hill. Jerusalem is clearly in sight, only a few hundred yards away! We are eager to get going, but Jesus knows there are others who still need to be involved, others who need to be cared for! We know how the story ends and while we want to re-write it, there are salient points of the story we have missed. For example, if we leave now we leave before the disciples have the opportunity to return with the colt others might not be willing to hear the story all the way through. Our decision to edit the story, to speed up the procession means that we forgo the opportunity for Jesus to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Zechariah. "Your king will come, riding on a colt, on the foal of an ass." Woops! A prophecy unfulfilled is an opportunity to witness unrecognized.

When we rush God's plan, we fail to recognize that each action God has foretold is an opportunity for someone to choose to believe in the fullness of His plan! If the failure of Jesus to ride down the hill on a donkey caused your son or daughter to miss the connection to the coming messiah, how would you feel about the outcome of the story we are re-editing this morning? But there is more! If we fail to wait for the donkey, we fail to give its owners the opportunity to participate in the triumphal procession!

When Jesus calls the two disciples and sends them into the village, He knows what we have already been told. There will be some who ask what the disciples are doing with the animals. The disciples have a reply, but the owners still have a choice! If we fail to wait, we fail to give others the opportunity we have been given ourselves; to participate in the fullness of God's ministry, to respond to others with the full measure of the love of God and neighbor. Woops! Maybe we should be a little more careful in our editing process. Maybe we should examine the rest of the story as well and look completely at the potential outcomes before we make changes. So we wait.

Now we stand on top of the Mount of Olives. We look back at all we have missed and we reflect on what might have been had we been more aware. We stand where Jesus stands, but now we stand resolved! We will not miss the opportunities of the future. And in our resolve, we hear the clamor of the rest of the crowd. The disciples have returned. They have the colt! The prophesy can be fulfilled! Others can make the connection! The owners have chosen to participate! Our crowd of faithful witness has grown! We are ready!

We sit Jesus on the colt. He begins to ride down the hill. The crowds of all those whom he has helped go ahead of him laying cloaks and palm branches in the path ahead of Him. They shout with joy as he

proceeds down the path. We listen at first to their words. "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in Heaven and glory in the highest heaven!" Jesus knows these words. He has heard them before. Do you know them? Have you heard them?

On a clear night long ago there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared before them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. They were terrified, but the angel said do not be afraid. I have come to bring you good news for unto you this day, in the city of David, a savior is born who shall be Messiah! And at the announcement there were multitudes of angels singing glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace, good will to all with whom He finds favor!

We do know the words! The fullness of them begins to sink in. The story told so long ago is finally coming true. Jesus hears them and knows also that the story is coming to pass. God is joining the hosts of heaven and the people of earth in a chorus of praise and worship. The Kingdom of Heaven has come near! The opportunity to share in God's grace and love has been offered! Some have chosen to accept! Others still have the opportunity to hear the invitation! Sadly, some have chosen to go another way. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

We long to re-write this part just a little! We would like for all to have heard, for all to have accepted, for all to rejoice so as we think that through we remember the meal we ate with Jesus last week. We remember his anointing as our Passover lamb and we realize that our hearing and acceptance is not enough. We have still sinned. We are still dead in our sins and unless that death is overcome, there can be no union with God! Perhaps we should leave this part of the story as it is!

We walk on. As we continue down the hill we pass by the garden at Gethsemane. We walk with the crowds but we also walk with Jesus. He knows the future events that will transpire here. Just as he knew about the colt that would be tied in the village, he knows what will transpire here in just a few days. Because He knows, we also know. We can visualize with Him the cowardly acts of a betrayer, the cruel acts of soldiers, the cries of anguish as He prays, "Let this cup pass me by!"

We might like to re-write this part of the story too. As we attempt an alternate version however we recognize that past events have already precluded any future alteration. When we failed to recognize the hurting and pain of a Judas, we allowed the rest of God's prophecy about him to be fulfilled. He has already made arrangements with the priests, the price has been determined just as God foretold it. The events of the past have predictable consequences and we cannot re-write this part without unraveling the entire story. Because of these past acts the prophecy of 30 pieces of silver and the potter's field will come to pass. Because of past acts, Peter's denial will take place. There is no altering this part of the story either. Our desire to edit the story is proving fruitless at this point, but still we walk on, following the footsteps of Jesus, down the Mount of Olives! We walk on committed to our desire to make this year, this Easter different.

A little farther down the hill we glance in another direction. With Jesus, we see Calvary, the hill where the crucifixion will take place on Friday. We want to look away! We can't imagine the pain that will be inflicted here. Here at this place, more than any other place we would like to re-write the story. Calvary

and the cross seem incomprehensible to us; they seem unnecessary to us. We know we have sinned! We will strive to do better! O God! Let this cup pass Him by! Let Him remain with us!

We want to look away but we cannot! The horror we know is coming is like the horror in a scary movie! We know the evil is just around the corner and there is nothing we can do about it! Try as we might we cannot seem to avoid it. We glance over at the hill. At the same moment we look He also looks! For just a brief moment our eyes meet the eyes of Jesus and He knows we know! He knows we would like to re-write the script for this part of the story, but He also knows that because we failed to notice those who were less fortunate than us earlier in the script we are now powerless to prevent what is about to happen. He feels our pain, He knows our shame and in that moment He smiles at us!

He smiles! How can he smile? How can he find any kind of compassion in the moment He passes Calvary? I believe He smiles because He not only knows what is coming but in that moment when His eyes catch ours He knows the sincerity of our repentance. As we follow the footsteps of Jesus past Calvary we can scarcely help but remember the opportunities we missed to help others in our Lenten journey. We remember how we have been caught up in our own sacrifice and in our own effort to strengthen our faith disciplines that we missed the opportunities to love others and walk with them in our journey. Jesus smiles because He now knows our genuine desire to change, our hope of repentance, our willingness to return to God! Because of the promise He senses in us, He is willing to endure Calvary! He is willing to take on our sin so we can have a future to love and serve God! Even in our desire to re-write this part of the story we recognize that we cannot. Without His willingness to suffer our sin, we cannot be restored to the fullness of relationship with God! Disappointed, dissatisfied with our own inability to create a new outcome, we still find hope in the smile of satisfaction on the face of Jesus. We walk on, following the footsteps of Jesus, continuing in our resolve to make this Easter story different!

Now we come to Jerusalem! We stand before the gates and before we enter, once again we look at Jesus. This time we do not see Him smiling. In the verses just after our passage this morning we find Him weeping. He weeps outside the gates of the city because He knows there are many who will not repent, many who will not believe, many who will not hear His message! He weeps for all who might never know what we have learned!

Suddenly we find the part of the story we can re-write! We cannot go back to the mountain side and rediscover the woman and her children, we cannot go to the desert and recognize the homeless person, we cannot go to the synagogue and pray with the parents of the sick child, we cannot reseal ourselves at the table, we cannot invite Judas to a different decision! These events are in our past and they have irreversible consequences, but in God's eyes, past is past. He remembers our sins no more! Because of what will be in the future of this week, the price of our sins is paid once and for all time by the work of Jesus! What we can re-write is our future!

We can re-write our future because it has not been written yet! All of us have the opportunity to change the tears of sadness Jesus feels for Jerusalem to tears of Joy as we search diligently for those who have not yet heard the good news! In our future we can discover those whom God calls us into

ministry with! In our future we can recognize that we walk in Jesus' footsteps together. In our future we can recognize that we are God's GIFT to each other! That GIFT is summed up in our mission statement; Growing In Faith Together! We are not there yet, but we have the opportunity together to grow into all God knows we can be! As we follow the footsteps of Jesus, we can remember His smile as we pass by Calvary and we can rededicate our lives to service not because of what we can do, but because of what He can do through us! He can accomplish His purposes, fulfill His Kingdom, and fully communicate God's love for all creation as He lives in us!

We cannot re-write the story of Palm Sunday. It is our rehearsal for Easter Sunday and resurrection, but we can commit ourselves to this Holy Week; to dedicating our lives to embracing the celebrations of Passover, Good Friday, the silence of Saturday and then the Joy Of Easter Sunday in new and deliberate ways as we continue to Grow in God's Grace and Love. This week, let us choose Him! Let us Follow the Footsteps of Jesus. Amen!