

The Crowds along the Way

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Palm Sunday, Year A

Matthew 21:1-11

When I was first discerning a call to ministry, there was a verse of scripture that really spoke to me. You might say it resonated with me spiritually. The verse has been associated with John the Baptist:

“A voice cries out, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

I can't explain it, but for some reason that verse hits me right in the spine.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”: On the one hand, I think, *Wow, what an amazing image, how amazing that God would call a human being to be a part of the divine story.*

And at the same time I think, *What on earth? Prepare the way... of the **Lord**?* How are we supposed to prepare the way of the Lord? Aren't we all supposed to follow Jesus, not precede him? Given the choice I would much rather have Jesus stepping out in front of me, leading the safari, not sending me ahead to prepare the way, to hack away at the vegetation with my little machete.

I'm partial to the God of Psalm 23. The Lord “leads me beside still waters.” Yes, Jesus leads me... sounds good. Or perhaps you prefer that old “footprints” poem in which Jesus carries us during the hard times. Yes. That works splendidly for me.

But whenever I hear, “Prepare the way of the Lord” I am reminded that sometimes Jesus does just lead us, or carry us. Sometimes Jesus sends us ahead, calling us to journey into new places and to do unexpected things.

Today's story is just the kind of story where that happens. It's kind of easy to miss that—what with the donkey and the colt and the cloaks and the hoopla and the palm branches and the shouts of Hosanna and the turmoil in the streets of Jerusalem. This is Jesus' parade, of course, and he is the center of it all—the recipient of all that attention and pomp, the king, the prophet Jesus of Nazareth

in Galilee. But I was a theater person in high school and college, so I'm always looking at the stage instructions in these stories—who's standing where, who's moving, who's on the outside of the action and who's in the center.

Let's take the the disciples, for example. Jesus sends them to a nearby village to retrieve a donkey and a colt. But not to a village they've already been, not to a village where Jesus had just visited and the memory of him is fresh in their minds. No, Jesus says, "Go into the village ahead of you.

"Go to that place you haven't been,
go to that place I haven't taken you yet,
go to that place that's still up the road aways.

"There will be a donkey and colt there, and if anyone says anything just tell them, 'The Lord needs them.' "

Now, we know that the disciples did what they were told; they let Jesus send them on ahead with these very cryptic instructions. But I have to wonder if they protested a little bit. They didn't know what they would encounter there. Were there dangers on the road? We are very close to Jerusalem—hostilities are starting to build and it won't be long before they boil over. It's not hard to imagine them putting up a bit of a fight...

Do we have to go to that village up ahead? Why don't we go back to that village we just left? They know us there. I think I saw a donkey and a colt at old Eli's house. We don't know what we'll find in this village up ahead. It's unknown territory. Maybe they're hostile to us.

Or perhaps:

*Y'know what, Jesus? Why don't **you** go on ahead and we'll tag along behind. You will make a much more convincing argument than us anyway. Y'know, we dropped our fishing nets in order to **follow** you. Not to go ahead of you.*

You see, it takes faith to follow Jesus. And we are called to do that. But it takes blind faith to go ahead of Jesus, into the unknown. It takes irrepressible faith to walk down a road your feet have never walked before.

It takes intrepid faith to look back over your shoulder and see Jesus, smiling and saying, “Yes, go on. I’ll be right here when you get back.”

The crowds making their way into Jerusalem knew this. Look at the text. Of course, some followed Jesus, shouting their Hosannas and their Blesseds. But it’s not the crowd in Jesus’ rear-view mirror, following at a comfortable distance, that gives this particular Sunday its name, Palm Sunday. It was the crowd that went ahead of him. The crowd that cut palm branches and put them on the road, that spread its cloaks on the road—the crowd that prepared the way of the Lord. You can’t do that when you’re following. You’ve got to be out ahead.

These crowds ahead of him—they just couldn’t help themselves. They couldn’t help bursting into Jerusalem, that busy and bustling city, and sending the city into a messy uproar. “He’s coming! He’s coming! Jesus, the prophet has arrived. Blessed is the one who comes.”

Are there places in our lives in which we’re obediently following Jesus? Thank God for that obedience.

But could it be that maybe, just maybe, Jesus has stopped leading for a moment and is just standing with you where you are, and maybe he’s just pointing. Just pointing, to that village up the road, the village where something risky resides.

Who knows what you’ll find there?

Who knows what we will find there?

Maybe we’ll find something new and life-giving, like the 100 year old church in Texas I read about recently, that decided to open a new church, in a place where there was no Christian community. Instead of focusing on themselves and their own lives, they are focusing outward.

Or maybe it’s something like the church in North Carolina that is partnering with a local non-profit to renovate a nearby house so that people getting over addiction can live and receive the support they need for a fresh start.

Or maybe it’ll be something like the church in Virginia near where I live, who

heard the need in their community for affordable housing. So they sold their historic building to an affordable housing developer, and are now tenants in a new multi-use space that serves their community so much better than their previous facility, as beautiful and full of memories as it was.

Not only are each of these churches going ahead into an unknown space, but they are preparing a place for Jesus. Putting their cloaks on the road and making a place for the one who said, “That which you do for the least of these, you do to me.”

Yes, it takes faith to follow Jesus.

But it takes Palm Sunday faith to go ahead into the unfamiliar.

It takes Palm Sunday faith to go ahead of Jesus, knowing that the road leads us through the events of Holy Week... for we know that going into the unknown doesn't always mean fun and adventure.

Faith is a risk, and nowhere do we feel that more acutely than in the events of Holy Week.

But let us not shy away from faith, for here is the twist—and how often does the gospel provide a twist! There is nowhere that Jesus sends us that is unfamiliar to him. It may be foreign territory to us, but there no dimension of human experience that Jesus did not share in. That's one of the messages of Holy Week. So let us be bold to be sent by him.

Thanks be to God.

—*MaryAnn McKibben Dana* © 2020