

“Backing up and Taking in the Whole Story”

Mark 11:1-11

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

March 25, 2018

Homiletics professor and seminary president Theodore J. Wardlaw suggests that the best way to view the events of this week is by backing up and taking in the whole story from a distance. He references a time when he was with a group viewing an exhibit of van Gogh paintings and a man pressed his nose to each canvas in an effort to see every dollop of paint, every stroke of the brush, every detail, but in the process, he not only obstructed the view of others, he missed the perspective of the whole which could only be obtained by backing up.

Wardlaw suggests that, while there is a time and place for examining details, the story of Holy Week - Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, suffering and death on Good Friday, and subsequent resurrection on Easter Sunday - is best viewed as a whole. There is wisdom in this approach because some of the details are difficult to sort out, and in the final analysis, they can distance us from the story's truths. We benefit from backing up and taking in the whole canvas and thus seeing where each specific part fits into the whole.

As we take a step back and look at today's part of the story, the familiar Palm Sunday narrative, we see that Jesus is setting the stage for a major confrontation with the powers that be, both secular and religious. Jesus has stirred up controversy before. In fact, from the very beginning of his life, he has created conflict just by being who he is.

His birth provokes Herod to kill all the young children in and around Bethlehem, thus forcing Jesus and his family to flee their homeland and take refuge in Egypt (Matthew 2:1-18). His first sermon inspires people in his hometown of Nazareth to try and kill him (Luke 4:14-30). One of his first miracles, the healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, stirs the wrath of the Pharisees, and they begin plotting with the Herodians to destroy him (Mark 3:1-6). And on and on

it goes. Everywhere Jesus turns, he finds new disciples, but he also makes enemies, including some powerful enemies.

So, what happens on this day is not entirely new, but it is one further step in poking the bear called Rome and inspiring the ire of Jewish leaders. To enter Jerusalem as a hero when Pilate is the official secular hero is to thumb your nose at Rome. To accept the people's words of praise and affirmation and allow them to link you to messianic language like, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" is to spit in the face of the Pharisees and Sadducees. If Jesus' intent is to provoke the rage of the most powerful people in town and thus insure his demise, he could not script things any better!

I think of a time when one of our members who used to be an ACC basketball official, I probably shouldn't say it was Murphy Osborne... had a confrontation with an ACC coach, I probably shouldn't say he was from a team no longer in the conference named Maryland... Anyway, the coach was not happy with things - his players, the calls, the score. So, he made some noise on the sideline and rumbled quite a bit to no avail. Finally, he said to Murphy, "Just what do I have to do to get a technical?" Murphy suggested a few words that might accomplish his goal. So, the coach screamed out a string of expletives, at which point, Murphy said, "That'll do it!" and he gave the coach a technical.

Sometimes coaches want technicals for various reasons - to inspire their team, to get the official's attention, to let out their anger - but usually they know when they are going to get one. Surely Jesus knows he is provoking trouble when he rides into town. Surely he realizes there will be a major confrontation now, one he probably will not survive. If his intent is to stir up trouble, he could not have chosen a better way. Of course, this may be his intent; the cross is, in a way, inevitable; but as we back up and look at the story, we see what is going on in this part of it - Jesus is setting the stage for things to come.

Now, this part of the story is mostly about him. We are called to follow him in every way, but it is not very often that we have a need to be as provoking as we possibly can. But there may be a message for us here, a subtle reminder that our primary concern is not with what other people think about us.

There was an old cartoon which pictured a monument to the successful pastor in which a stately figure was honored for finishing his sermons before noon, concluding his ministry without controversy and leaving his church without debt. On the surface, these may seem like good things, and I will finish before noon today, but simply avoiding challenges is no way to do ministry nor is it a formula for discipleship.

Our calling is to follow Jesus, to discern the divine intent for our lives and do it. That's what we commit ourselves to in baptism. We don't go looking for trouble, but nor do we avoid it all costs. Rather, we act out of an inner sense of what God would have us to do, and not always does everyone else understand. Jesus comes into town today not because he wants to start a fight, but because this is what he must do. Sometimes we face resistance in the process of being faithful to God.

But when we take a step back from this story, we not only see that Jesus is setting the stage for conflict; we see who Jesus is. It is easy to miss this. He is entering town to a hero's welcome, and the kind of hero the people expect is one who will deliver them from captivity to Rome.

When they shout, "Hosanna!" which is not a general word of praise, but a plea for help, they are not thinking about spiritual help. They are thinking about social and political help. "Save us!" they cry, as in - from oppression. Even the use of leafy branches, or palm branches as they are called in John 12:13, is reminiscent of the scene where the Maccabean hero Simon enters Jerusalem (1 Maccabees 13:51).

But, as we know, Jesus is not this kind of Messiah. He is more like the suffering servant the prophet Isaiah describes in numerous passages, including today's reading (Isaiah 50:4-9a), than a king like David. He is the one who does not count equality with God as something to be exploited, as the Apostle Paul tells the church in Philippi, but rather empties himself into the form of a slave, humbles himself and becomes obedient, even to the point of death on a cross.

This is the kind of Messiah Jesus is, and while there are details in the story which might confuse us, there are also details that nudge us in the right direction, if we are willing to back up and see them in context. First, there is the matter of riding into town on a colt or donkey in other

versions of the story. Even without any context, we realize he is not on a mighty stallion. This is not The Lone Ranger riding into town on Silver for those old enough to understand the reference. It's more like the squeaky little guy in the Diet Dr. Pepper commercials riding on a pony. But a little context underscores the humble nature of Jesus' entrance. Zechariah 9:9 refers to an entrance on a donkey or colt.

But not only does Jesus enter on a humble beast, he doesn't really act like a political figure once he gets into town. He doesn't make any speeches, he doesn't stir up the crowd and talk about what will come next. Mark says he enters the temple, takes a look around, and since it is late, goes out to Bethany with the twelve. It is not much of a performance, but 'late' here may refer not just to the time of day, but to where Jesus is on this journey, how little time he has left.

So, what we see here, if we back up a bit, are glimpses of who Jesus really is - not a conquering hero, but a suffering savior. What we see is a preview of coming attractions in the way of the cross.

I think of a bit of history with our daughter. Her name is Margaret Alison Chapman. We have always called her Alison, a name linked to Dana's great-grandfather who was a prominent Baptist minister, though we shorten it to Ali. When she was in first grade, we received a note from her teacher which referred to Margaret. We assumed this was because Margaret came first on the computer printout, but the teacher told us she used this name because our daughter asked her to do so.

Confused, we asked our daughter why she preferred this name. She said, "Because it has more letters, because it is more difficult to spell, and because it is more sophisticated." This was in first grade, it was a preview of coming attractions, a glimpse of who she would be today, as well as the reason you know her as Margaret.

This is what the crowd sees in Jesus on Palm Sunday and this is what we see - a preview of coming attractions. There is a parade today, but there will be a cross on Friday, because Jesus is a different kind of Messiah, one who lays down life for his friends. So, there is a measure of joy today, but it is a temporary kind of joy. The more enduring kind can only be found on the other side of suffering and hardship. This is true for Jesus and all who benefit from his saving work.

There is one other thing we can see in this story if we back up far enough to take in the whole picture – a glimpse of who we are as people very much like the members of this crowd.

This is not the same crowd which calls for Pilate to crucify Jesus. I have made this mistake before, but that is a different day in a different place with different people. There could be some overlap, but it is not the same crowd. So, it is not accurate to say that the same crowd which shouts “Hosanna!” soon shouts, “Crucify!”

But where are these people when it comes time to make a decision about Jesus’ fate? We know that his closest disciples aren’t much help. Judas, no matter what his motives, betrays him; Peter denies even knowing him not once or twice, but three times; and the rest of the disciples run for cover. Only the women stick around for the cross.

So, what we see is an image of people who are loyal and devoted when all is going well, but who disappear when the going gets tough. In other words, what we see is people like us.

I think of the way fans come and go in their support of various teams, not just from season to season, but from game to game. Years ago, when we lived in Winston-Salem, Dana and I attended a Wake Forest basketball game. They were having a good year, but they were down seventeen points early in the second half to Florida State. More and more of the fans started grumbling and nearly a third left.

We didn’t go to many games, only when we were given tickets or were guests of the Divinity School. So, we weren’t going to leave. And we were glad we didn’t because Wake Forest came back and won! We had to wonder what the fans who left felt like after the fact. And I don’t mean to single out the Demon Deacons. All schools have some fair-weather fans, those who only offer support when things are going well.

In the story we recall this week, Jesus seems to have mostly fair-weather fans. Very few people stick with him when the going gets tough, though since we are backing up to take in the big picture, after the resurrection, things change. Emboldened by their hope in resurrection, his disciples stick with Jesus no matter what.

The question is – what kind of followers are we, fiercely loyal or fair-weather, before the cross or after the resurrection believers? We

live on this side of the resurrection, but does the character and depth of our faith reveal the imprint of resurrection hope? Do we speak up for Jesus even when it is unpopular to do so? Do we follow his teachings even when the crowd around us is going another way?

To be more specific, do we welcome the stranger in our land when many are ridiculing immigrants, do we challenge those who gossip and bully others, do we insist on honesty and fairness in our workplaces and places of learning, do we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus when everyone around us is putting down Christian faith? Are we like the crowd on Palm Sunday, joyful supporters in times of ease who disappear when it comes time for the cross, or are we like the post-resurrection disciples who are willing to die for their faith? These are the kinds of questions we ask when we back up and take in the whole story.

In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner says that the Bible is like a window. If we look at a window very closely, we see fly-specks, dust, the crack where Junior's Frisbie hit it. But if we look through the window, we see the world beyond. "Something like this is the difference," he says, "between those who see the Bible as a Holy Bore and those who see it as the Word of God which speaks out of the depths an almost unimaginable past into the depths of ourselves (p. 12)."

It is very much like what Theodore Wardlaw says about backing up to take in the whole story. There is a time and place for examining details, but there is more to be gained from backing up and taking in the whole picture, from allowing this great story to provide a window into the world and ourselves. Today we see Jesus stirring up trouble, we see who he really is and we catch a glimpse of ourselves as we are and as we might be. That is a lot to consider in a day.