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April 13, 2014  
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29  
Matthew 21:1-11

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Palm Sunday

## **TWO REALITIES**

Is the glass half full or half empty? We can look at it either way and it likely makes a difference in the way we perceive the world. Albert Einstein is credited with saying, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." <sup>1</sup> An essayist named Chuck Klosterman has written, "There are two ways to look at life. The first view is that nothing stays the same and that nothing is inherently connected, and that the only driving force in anyone's life is entropy. The second is that everything pretty much stays the same (more or less) and that everything is completely connected, even if we don't realize it." <sup>2</sup>

Palm Sunday is one of those events described in the gospel accounts where we begin to see that there is more than one way to understand what is happening. Before Jesus enters Jerusalem, he sends two of his disciples into a village to secure an animal on which he would ride into the city. He tells them what they will find and what to say if the owner stops them from carrying out his instructions. Had he already talked with the owner ahead of time to set this up? Or did he simply know what was going to happen? Actually, Matthew's narrative is the only Palm Sunday account where Jesus is described as riding two animals as he enters the city – a donkey and a colt. Did the gospel writer misunderstand the Hebrew poetic parallelism found in Zechariah that described the same animal with the words 'donkey' and 'colt'? Or did the writer include both animals as a symbol to show that Jesus was coming into the holy city as a peaceful king who rides in on a donkey instead of a stallion, and also includes riding on the young untrained colt as a show of humility?

Those who are coming into the city at the same time as Jesus see things differently from those who were residents of Jerusalem. Those who are making a pilgrimage to observe Passover near the temple are excited to be accompanying Jesus. The 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm would be one that such journeyers would sing as they drew near to the holy city, so it is not surprising to find one of its lines in the cheers of this traveling crowd, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." But the residents in town are shaken by the commotion that accompanies his presence and are asking who he is. Could the cloaks and branches being laid before him be a sign of a royal entrance? They understood Herod to be king, Caesar to be emperor, Pilate to be governor, and several groups of established religious leaders all sharing a life and death power indicating that oppression was most unlikely to be dethroned. Those coming into the city who turned the event into Palm Sunday recognized those figures and their positions of power, but they were influenced more by this humble character riding into the city. They understood him to be a prophet, but could he perhaps be the coming king, someone to be called 'Lord,' or 'Messiah?' Some of them had seen him open the eyes of the blind, open the mouths of the mute, enable the lame to walk, and feed the hungry when there seemed to be few resources to be found. These stories were exhilarating, a sign that God would help with the long-ignored people's agenda. God seemed to be addressing their physical and spiritual health.

In the people's earlier religious training, they had heard enough empty platitudes to last a lifetime, but this Jesus talked of and enabled them to experience an engaging, compassionate, liberating God. The Passover the people were coming to commemorate was a time to retell the stories of the God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. But talk of liberation was a bit unsettling for those from the religious and political center who benefited from the status quo. The engagement, the compassion, the liberation would take a different form than anyone had expected as Jesus placed himself on the line with his devotion for God's agenda.

It can be disturbing when God makes an entrance into the power centers of our lives. We can respond to that disturbance with hostility and rejection or we can welcome the One who comes in the name of the Lord as liberator and life giver. Over and over again in the Bible the initial response of people to the intrusion of God is a response of fear. But over and over we hear God's gracious words: "Be not afraid." The only reason we need to fear in the presence of God is if we are more committed to keeping things the way they are than we are open to welcoming him into our lives.

Perhaps this is where how we see this story becomes a both/and instead of an either/or. This is not just an example of what God's entrance into the power centers of our lives will look like. It is also a demonstration by Jesus of what our lives are supposed to look like. We see in him the ultimate example of the fully human life, one who is on a pilgrimage. Pilgrims are people who travel from one holy place to another unencumbered by lesser loyalties and ties. As they travel, the concept of what is essential changes. So they travel light, as we see with Jesus, who even had to borrow his own ride into the city. They travel without the ties to lesser loyalties, which frees them to truly come in the name of the Lord. Jesus is a demonstration of what our true humanity looks like, which is not an accommodation to the current powers. But neither is it an agenda of accommodation of things or power for us. Rather, it is seeking and following God's agenda, that addresses those with special needs along the way, but that also challenges the power stations of the status quo.

We have been traveling through the season of Lent. It has been a time to explore not the fullness or emptiness of a glass, but of our lives. Now we approach the difficult events of passion week. If we are to find God's way through it to the place of Easter and new life, then we will need to be pilgrims. As we empty our lives of our own ambitions and lower loyalties, then we are also emptying ourselves of that which fills us with turmoil and fear. That emptying makes room for us to be filled with hosannas and deep gratitude and love that can transform us and this world. Blessed are all who come in the name of the Lord!

<sup>1</sup> A quote attributed to Albert Einstein, but I was unable to find the precise source.

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, Scribner, 2004.

