

ALONE
Isaiah 50:4-9
Mark 11:1-11

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Texts

Isaiah 50:4-9a

*The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.*

*The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.*

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” ’ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

*‘Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

The Jewish historian Josephus estimates that as many as three million people gathered each year in Jerusalem for Passover.¹ If this estimate is accurate, it means that this many people were in the city when Jesus entered on what we have come to call Palm Sunday. Three million people, mostly pilgrims, crowding the city for a special religious event. Something like the number who visited our city for the Inauguration of the President in what seems like ten months but what is in reality ten weeks ago.

From childhood Sunday School, from donkey processions, from choral music, most of us share an image of Palm Sunday as an event filled with people:

- Jubilant crowds streaming from the city to greet Jesus as he arrives on a small colt
- Children waving palm branches in the air
- People singing: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Yet as is often the case with religious memory, the details of Palm Sunday are conflated in our minds from the accounts of four separate gospel writers.

- It is in Matthew that children appear greeting Jesus outside Jerusalem.²
- It is in John that people wave palm branches.³
- And it is in Luke that the singing is so loud and joyous that Jesus is moved to say to the Pharisees who try to hold down the noise level: “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.”⁴

All in all, we think of Palm Sunday as a loud, joyous, even raucous occasion, an occasion filled with people.

I.

Unless, that is, we draw our picture from Mark.

You see in Mark, the story appears a little differently than in Matthew, Luke, and John.

- In Mark, the people who greet Jesus outside Jerusalem shout acclaim, but their shouts proclaim Jesus as one “coming in the name of the Lord,”⁵ not as one who is necessarily royal or divine.
- In Mark, those who shout are not a crowd of pilgrims from Jerusalem; rather, they are simply disciples who have been with Jesus all along.⁶
- In Mark, the people do not follow Jesus into the city; rather, after the mild demonstration, Jesus rides into the city alone.⁷

The triumphal entry is more muffled in Mark, more contained, more dignified than in Matthew, Luke, and John. It is more like a crowd which gathers when a minor league team wins its division than one which will gather Monday night when either North Carolina or Michigan State will emerge with the NCAA basketball championship.

In addition, once Jesus enters the city in Mark, he goes to the temple, but instead of driving its moneychangers out immediately – as he does in Matthew and Luke – he enters the temple, “looks around at everything,” and then returns to Bethany for the night.⁸

While the text does not say that Jesus enters the Temple alone, it implies so, leaving us the reader with a poignant view of Jesus, standing alone in the cavernous temple, perhaps peering into the immediate future,

¹ PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel of Mark: The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 660; cited in Agnes Norfleet's paper on this text for the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2009.

² According to Norfleet, only Matthew has a “very large” crowd (Matthew 21:8); she deduces that the popular image of children on Palm Sunday comes from this statement.

³ John 12:13.

⁴ Luke 19:40.

⁵ Mark 9-10.

⁶ Mark 11:9. The shouting is done by those (disciples) “who went ahead and who followed.”

⁷ Mark 11:11. Again, thanks to Agnes Norfleet for these insights.

⁸ Mark 11:11.

- When he will return to cleanse the temple⁹
- When its leaders will challenge his authority¹⁰
- When he will silence his challengers with his teaching¹¹
- When he will question the Temple's economic system and the motives of those who give modestly "out of their abundance" by pointing to a widow who gives all that she has "out of her poverty"¹²
- And when he will predict the eventual destruction of the building so central to his faith and theirs.¹³

In addition, this glimpse of a solitary Jesus alone in the Temple joins other vignettes Mark provides detailing just how alone Jesus was in his final days:

- It is Mark who tells us that at the moment of Jesus' arrest, "All of [his disciples] [desert] him and [flee]."¹⁴
- It is Mark who tells of "a certain young man who was following [Jesus], wearing nothing but a linen cloth, [who when arresting offers] caught hold of him...left the linen cloth and ran off naked"¹⁵ – perhaps a harbinger of the "young man" who would appear at the tomb after Jesus' death, perhaps a harbinger of the "linen cloth" that would be wrapped around Jesus' body, perhaps a collective symbol of betrayal, abandonment, denial Jesus would face from those closest to him.¹⁶
- It is Mark who depicts both thieves on the cross taunting Jesus rather than petitioning and praising him (as they do in Luke).¹⁷
- And finally it is in Mark that the last word Jesus speaks from the cross is an expression of utter aloneness: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"¹⁸

In Mark, at the moment of his death, Jesus Christ is alone.

II.

What does Jesus' aloneness say to us? How do we understand and relate to the solitude of Jesus Christ, particularly in his last days and hours?

Let me offer a pathway to relating to his aloneness.

(a)

When we follow Jesus through the events of Holy Week, the most obvious and prominent way that we can think we have to relate to him, if we are honest, is through martyrdom. He dies for his faith; we need to be willing to die as well. The logic is impeccable; it grows directly out of the events.

I don't know about you, but as compelling as these events are, it is almost impossible for me to conceive of "giving my own life" – as Jesus gave his – for a cause I believe in or even a God I worship.

- Perhaps my reluctance to think about martyrdom stems from the fact that, comparatively speaking, I am both a child of freedom and a child of privilege.
- Perhaps it is because I have lived only in a country in which I can say most anything, believe most anything, stand for most anything without much threat of government reprisal.
- Perhaps it is because I am young enough to have benefitted from the sacrifices others made before me by giving their lives in the European or Pacific Theatres, young enough to have missed Viet Nam narrowly, and young enough to have seen others before me give their lives in Birmingham and Selma and Philadelphia, Mississippi, and Memphis that I have never had to face seriously the prospect of giving my life for a cause larger than myself.

⁹ Mark 11:15-19.

¹⁰ Mark 11:27-33.

¹¹ Mark 12:34.

¹² Mark 12:41-44.

¹³ Mark 13:1-8.

¹⁴ Mark 14:50.

¹⁵ Mark 14:51.

¹⁶ These are offered in Mark 14:51-52n, in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Mark 14:32, compare with Luke 23:39-43.

¹⁸ Mark 15:34. Jesus also speaks these words in Matthew and Luke, but it is in Mark and Matthew that they are literally his last word on the cross.

- Perhaps my aversion to martyrdom is the way it has been used in the name of God in religious terrorism the past fifteen years.

As a young person I read the words with which modern day martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer opened his book *The Cost of Discipleship*: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”¹⁹ Even as an idealistic teenager in the 1960s, I knew that if Christ called me I would resist any call in which he bid me to “come and die.”

(b)

Whatever the reason, it is much easier for me to conceive of myself following Jesus in the aloneness he faced on Palm Sunday than in his martyrdom on Good Friday. I can relate to the idea that in doing the will of God, Jesus Christ was essentially alone.

- Alone among a crowd, even a crowd of three million
- Alone among disciples, even among twelve who are as close and committed as any human group can be
- Even alone even in the Temple, where God is worshipped, where pilgrims travel, where God’s people gather.

Even though Jesus was God’s unique Son, I can relate that in doing his Father’s will, Jesus was alone: *morally, radically, existentially alone*.

In one of the most beautiful passages in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, Isaiah describes one whom he calls “The Servant.”

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher [The Servant says],
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning [the Lord God] wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

...I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame...

Centuries of Jews have read these words and interpreted the Servant to be the people of Israel. Christians, observing the life and death of Jesus Christ, have taken these words to be a harbinger or description of what Christ faced. Jews and Christians alike have taken these words to be a description of what the people of God often face.

Whether the Servant is faithful Jew, faithful Christian, people of God, or Christ himself, the Servant is alone, *morally* alone, *radically* alone, *existentially* alone, as he or she seeks to teach, to listen, to sustain the weary with a word, even suffering physical abuse and emotional insult in the process.

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But though the Servant is alone, the Servant is not without God.

- “Morning by morning the Lord God wakens [me].”
- “The Lord wakens my ear—to listen as those who are taught.”

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1966). Originally published in 1937.

- The Lord gives me power “to sustain the weary with a word.”
- “I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”

III.

As we enter Holy Week, as we watch betrayal and arrest, abandonment and trial, death and burial of Jesus Christ, I ask you to ask yourselves:

- “Is there something I am doing because, to the best of my ability to discern the will of God, I believe God is compelling me to do it?”
- “Is this something I am doing essentially alone?”

If you answer “yes” to both these questions, then I ask you to remember these things:

- The God who wakened Jesus Christ every morning wakens you.
- The God who wakened the ear of his Servant that he might listen as those who are taught wakens your ear in the same fashion and to the same end.
- The God who has led all his Servants to sustain the weary with a word so leads you as well.

As one of your preachers and teachers, I counsel you to accept the honor of answering God’s call, even when you are alone in that answer. Though you may be alone on earth, you are in the good company of Jesus Christ, who went before you, equally alone, and yet who set his face like flint, who was not put to shame.

Amen.