

“ON THE CLOAKS OF MANY”
Psalm 118:1-12, 18-29; John 12:12-16; Mark 11:1-11
Palm Sunday - April 9, 2006
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Today we celebrate the day that Christians have come to call Palm Sunday. This is the day when we hear the familiar story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. As it played out it must have been a surreal scene because the images don't quite fit anyone's expectations. On one hand Jesus arrives in a scene that is filled with triumphant images of a conquering hero, as if he were both literally and figuratively being anointed as royalty based on the response he receives. On the other hand, in this same story we also witness that Jesus arrives not aboard a regal steed, but instead atop a borrowed donkey colt. As Jesus arrives in the holy city of Jerusalem we remember the parallels to his first arrival, in a barn; and, so, there is consistency to this story as the would-be king seemingly always arrives in a manner befitting only the downwardly mobile ruler. We know the Triumphant Entry story of Palm Sunday well, and for many of us the pageantry of this day is so very necessary if we are to truly understand that Holy Week is upon us. Here we are again: my ears and my heart still echo with the strains of “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” and yet I am still not sure I can comprehend what happened that day. Today we read accounts from two gospels, yet I still struggle to make sense of how that parade came to happen and how those witnesses came to line the streets as Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem. Seemingly, no matter how many times I read our scripture lessons, I still find myself bewildered by the events of that day and wonder how a spectacle such as this could go so wrong so fast. If all those people turned out to welcome Jesus, how exactly do we so quickly get to the Garden of Gethsemane? Year after year this question remains a staggering reality for me, and I have no answer this year either.

This year, along the center aisle of our sanctuary we have created a path that we think might look something like the cloak-covered road that Jesus traveled upon as he entered into Jerusalem. My sermon writing this week took sort of a strange form because as I worked through the lessons I found myself doing a whole lot of daydreaming. Have I told you how much I love that my job comes complete with daydreaming time built in? It is true, but before anyone worries about where my daydreaming fits into my schedule I would like to share a bit about the daydreams of last week. My daydreams were about that cloak-lined road into Jerusalem and the people who might have stretched out their cloaks and stood around as Jesus entered. Scholars note that the waving of palm branches was probably related to military processions during the time of Jesus; and, further, we know that “Hosanna” means “save us.” So I have wondered what type of person those people were really expecting that day. Did the fact that Jesus arrived not with an army, but with a cluster of somewhat loyal disciples, leave anyone underwhelmed upon his arrival? Who were those people who lined the streets, and what exactly were they thinking as he passed them that day?

To begin to answer the question we need to walk a little...out to here (the Rev. Lambert leaves the podium to walk down the center aisle where cloaks were laid for the Palm Procession). . Let's start out here...with this cloak. I can imagine this cloak worn by an artisan who perhaps made lamps and sold them, along with oil, to make a living. We'll call him Elijah although he might

have been known simply as Eli. It doesn't matter really. What does matter is how he ended up out here spreading his cloak along the road to welcome Jesus. Perhaps he was in the crowd of people who so crowded the doorway to the house where Jesus was staying that some people had to lower their friend through the ceiling to make sure he could be close enough to Jesus to be healed. Perhaps he was there that day and watched Jesus as he gave that paralyzed man not only the ability to walk but also a promise that he had been forgiven for all that he had done. Perhaps Eli watched as that once paralyzed man walked by him, sleeping mat in hand, out into the world—free not just of his ailment but also free of the sins that controlled him. Perhaps Eli heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, passing not far from his shop; and after witnessing first hand what Jesus had done, he wanted to make sure that he was there when Jesus passed by. He was there that day, standing in the front, waiting for a glimpse of Jesus the Healer. I wonder if that is how a cloak like this came to be in the road.

This one is a small one, from a child perhaps. Maybe a young girl; her brother's cloak is probably around here somewhere too. But this young girl, perhaps named Sarah, probably had to drag her younger brother along to the side of the road. Her brother, I am sure, had other things he wanted to do that day, but Sarah had heard from a neighbor that something wonderful was going to happen on the road into town. Sarah heard about it only yesterday, but she managed to convince her mother to let her and her brother go to the market. On the way to the market they took a little detour, of course, because Sarah didn't want to miss out on this thing that was going to happen along the road. When they arrived at the road there was already quite the buzz about some guy named Jesus who was coming into town. People were using words like "Messiah" and "King." Some were saying he was holy, but some were whispering that he was a fraud. When Sarah and her brother reached the road they had to push their way through the crowd; but they were kids, and so they found themselves up in front. When people started laying their cloaks upon the road and waving palm branches, Sarah and her brother joined in. Perhaps that is how a cloak like this ended up on the road into Jerusalem.

This one here—in my daydreams—a cloak like this was worn by an old and faithful woman who had been around the edges of Jesus' ministry over the last few years. Perhaps her name was Rachel, Dara, or Miriam. Perhaps it doesn't matter what name she had in my dream. This woman had followed along with Jesus for more than a year, but she just couldn't keep up with all the walking. So, at some point, she returned to her home and lived with her sister; but in her heart she knew that she belonged with Jesus. When she heard he was coming to Jerusalem, she went and stood along the road deep in the city, for she knew Jesus would eventually arrive there. She wanted to see Jesus again for she believed in his teaching and had witnessed so many of his healings. She knew him, and when she heard him proclaimed to be the Messiah, she believed it; for only a Messiah could do all she had witnessed. She had been fed by baskets of overflowing loaves and fishes; she had seen mud used as a cure for blindness; she was not going to miss out on seeing the Messiah again. And so she stood along the road, waiting for Jesus to recognize her and welcome her once again. I wonder if that is how a cloak like this came to be upon the road leading into Jerusalem?

(At this point, the Rev. Lambert returned to the pulpit.) There were many cloaks and many stories that day. Maybe I have some of them right, or maybe my stories are just convenient dreams.

However, one thing is clear about that day. Something happened that day that brought people out into the streets to welcome Jesus into town. When I think of the pandemonium that is described in our bibles, I remember the archival footage of ticker-tape parades with Joe DiMaggio and the New York Yankees driving through Manhattan; or I think of footage depicting the celebrations at the end of World War II. Those were days filled with laughter and joy, smiles and hugs. That is the vision I have of Jesus entering Jerusalem. I imagine that it was a day when life came to a bit of a halt: when men, women, children—and a donkey or two—found themselves drawn into an impromptu parade to welcome Jesus the Messiah to town. It must have been a strange and glorious day.

What then are we to do on Palm Sunday? What does this day portend for us as 21st Century Christians? In my imagination, and in my faithful attempts to understand the events that will culminate in an empty tomb on Easter morning, this day is a day for each one of us to choose who we believe Jesus to be and to then decide if we can imagine ourselves as one of those who would have been drawn out into the street that day. Would we have been there to witness the spectacle? Would we have been among those who whispered about the “fraudulent Messiah?” Or would we have thrown down our cloaks and shouted, “Hosanna,” to the one who paraded past us—on a donkey of all things. Let me be frank. Next Sunday on Easter morning, amidst the pomp and circumstance of our celebration, will be a pretty easy day to be a Christian. Next Sunday is a day when everything looks rosy and clean, when we all drag out our Sunday best, and when our scriptures will sing out the glorious proclamation, “He is alive!” And it will all be good.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves, because we aren’t yet there. There is a whole lot of ugliness and betrayal to come before we get to that empty tomb. And for 21st Century Christians, that puts us in a bit of a bind, because it is so very nice to remind ourselves of that Easter glory and forget about all the “other stuff.” But the “other stuff” matters—a lot. It matters who we proclaim Jesus to be. It matters because if Jesus simply provides us with comfort and gives us permission to enjoy our pews and our committee work but doesn’t require us to take a risk for our faith, then we have missed our opportunity to shout, “Hosanna,” and mean it. In my mind there is no day in the Christian year that is more dedicated to inspiring the prophetic voices in all of us than Palm Sunday. This is a day when we are all called to understand that our faith sometimes calls us into the streets so that we can share our truth not just with those we know and trust, but also with God’s people everywhere. Palm Sunday is a day for daydreaming about the simple and not-so-simple people who went out of their way to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem a long time ago. When I first chose the sermon title, “On the Cloaks of Many” I did so in reference to Jesus riding upon the cloaks of many individuals on his way into Jerusalem. However, over the course of the last week, I have come to think that on Palm Sunday it is most important to recognize that we have walked upon the cloaks of many, and that that journey has created a faith for us and in us. Perhaps then, the real journey on Palm Sunday is ours as we decide when, if, and how we are going to meet and respond to Jesus. The path is prepared for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.