



Palm Sunday

The Kin-dom of God

Palm branches are a sign of victory.

"Hosanna" means "God save us."

Mark 11:1-11

"Martha Remembers"

Rev. Jamie Norwich McLennan

The longer I live, the more amazed I am at the places where God can be found—but most often only when I look back at what happened in the past! Even though I put a good deal of effort into looking for God everywhere I go, I am consistently surprised to notice God more in the past...less in the present...and only hinted at in the future. I guess that just goes to show the wisdom of the Hebrew people who have so many holy days and rituals that begin with a reminder of where God was in the midst of every tragedy.

Take this holy season for example: the season of Passover is upon us. In this season, we are supposed to remember how God saved us when he smote the Egyptians with the last of the plagues. Our ancestors ran out of Egypt with Pharaoh's army following right behind, and the waters and mud of the Red Sea just pulled them under. We remember this as a season of freedom at God's hand...

Oh. I'm sorry. My name is Martha. Jesus would often stop and stay with me, my sister Mary, and our brother Lazarus when he was in this area. I was thinking about him today, of course, because of the Passover festival beginning. That was what had me thinking about seeing God more in the looking back. In that week—a couple of decades ago—we weren't sure that God was present. How could he be in the midst of all that happened to Jesus? But as the months and years passed, we began to understand more of what happened—and why.

Jesus had been acting increasingly focused ever since he and Peter James and John had come down from the mountain the last time. Jesus acted like it was no big deal, but the other three were quite secretive about what had happened. All they would say is that Jesus had told them not to talk about it—but that it was a really big deal.

Everybody in the Jesus movement had decided to come to Jerusalem for the Passover that year, and so there was a lot of movement toward the city. Bethany is not too far out, and lots of people prefer to stay in our town, rather than finding lodgings in the city. I've heard that sometimes as many as 200,000 pilgrims will come for Passover; it is a big deal to offer the sacrifices in the Temple.

So our house was full to overflowing with Jesus and his followers. I always liked it that Jesus felt at home with us. It made me feel special-like my food was good and nourishing, and that I had value. Mary loved it, too, because Jesus always let her listen in when he was talking to his followers. Lazarus tried to stop her once, but Jesus smiled and called her "little sister" and that ended the conversation!

On the night before his last Passover with us, Jesus was laying out a plan before his followers. I could only hear bits and pieces as I put food on the table. I'll admit I got a little frustrated with Mary that she did not get up to help when there were so many extra mouths to feed. But she motioned to me, letting me know that something big was up, and that she needed to stay put.

Jesus was talking again about the Kingdom of God, and how the Temple needed to be transformed and that those ruling Jerusalem were corrupt. He had said it all before, but there was a greater sense of urgency behind his words. For the third time since coming down the mountain he spoke of his death and the need for sacrifice.

"We need to do something out of the ordinary to catch people's attention," Jesus said at one point. "We need to use the words of the prophets to help the people remember. This is a festival about freedom from tyranny, and the people—with God's help—have thrown out tyrants before! Think of Moses...think of the Maccabean Revolt! We just need for the people to remember."

Jesus went on to talk about the procession of Pontius Pilate and Romans that would enter by the western gate. His eyes flashed then and he said "I think we should go in by the eastern gate at the same time! I know a man who has a donkey that I could ride into the city-you know! The way the Prophet Zechariah said that a new king could be recognized as a good king? Riding on a donkey and coming in procession. We could do that!" There was enthusiastic response to this and the conversation and planning went on from there.

In the end, Jesus picked two disciples to go and arrange for the donkey colt. They were to meet him with the donkey a short way off from the walls of the city the next morning. Jesus would wait there with some of his followers, but many more were sent ahead to mingle with the rest of the crowd. They were told to cut palm branches from trees around, and when they saw Jesus, they were to begin waving them in the air and shouting "Hosanna! Save us...Jesus, save us!" at the top of their voices. Still others were to respond with the quote, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!"

It took many hours to plan the event, and Jesus talked late into the night. He wanted everyone to understand that this action was not without risk. While there would be additional Jews in town for the Passover, the Romans would also be there in full force to keep down any maneuver that might look like someone trying to kick out the Emperor. He gave people a chance to back out because of the danger.

"We want to remind our people about freedom and justice that are sorely lacking in Jerusalem today," Jesus said. "We want to help people see the Kingdom of God in our midst, so we will need to cleanse the Temple of the tax collectors...money changers...and corrupt leaders who have forgotten that they serve God. If we can awaken the people and remind them that they are God's chosen people, they will rise up and we will be strong enough to overcome all evil with the grace of our God!"

Finally all of the followers left for their beds, leaving Jesus and the Twelve to bed down for the night. Mary and I were still cleaning up from dinner and the meeting when we saw Jesus slip off to be by himself for a few moments. He headed away from both town and city.

"He's off to pray," Mary said to me. "I have watched him do this time after time when he is getting ready to make a big move. He spoke brave words tonight, but I think he is frightened; he has talked of his death often enough lately. I wish we could keep him from going into Jerusalem tomorrow. I am afraid for him--and for the others, too. The Romans don't want any trouble, and I am afraid that they will act harshly before they think things through."

I had to agree. It seemed a risky plan, even though many of those who had been present were thinking it was a lark, a way to poke fun at the Romans and then go out laughing. I started the bread for the next morning, watching until I saw Jesus return and settle in for the night.

Things went even better than Jesus had planned on the following day. At 9:00 in the morning when the Roman cohort entered Jerusalem on one side of the city, with Pontius Pilate riding on a noble white stallion, Jesus entered on the opposite side, riding on his donkey colt. The crowd readily followed the lead of those whom Jesus had sent ahead. The cries of "Hosanna!" filled the air, while coats and cloaks were laid on the ground before Jesus. Palm branches were everywhere and the children laughed and cried with the chaos of it all.

The crowd grew and grew until there were so many people on hand that Jesus could barely move forward. Peter finally came and began to lead the donkey by its harness, nudging people to the left and right to clear a path through the throng. When people realized that Jesus was headed toward the Temple where kings would be crowned, they began to fall back so that he could get through.

When Jesus got to the Temple, he got off the donkey. The crowd grew silent, watching his every move. Jesus strode to the Temple courts and looked in. Because it was late in the day, there was little activity and Jesus turned and left. When the crowd saw that there was going to be no more action for the day, they melted away. Jesus and the disciples headed back out of the city, returning the donkey to his owner and coming back home.

That palm parade was the beginning of end--or perhaps I should say that it was the ending of the first phase for the followers of The Jesus Way. I still shudder and weep when I think of the week...and the months...that followed that fateful parade. Everything had seemed so simple in the early days of the movement; Jesus spoke--and we followed. People were healed and lives transformed. The more people followed, the more complicated it became.

I've often wondered what might have happened if Jesus had not set things in motion that day. And I have wondered whether or not Jesus really knew what he was setting in motion. Knowing Jesus as I do, I think he did know, and I think he chose to make a sacrifice that would make a difference. I don't know if I would have had the courage to make such a choice...I struggled at the time, because as I said earlier, it is so much easier to see God's hand in those events looking back from these many years away from the painful events themselves. I guess it is all in how the story is remembered and told and interpreted.

I guess that is why I still tell the story; remembering the story and telling it again shapes us as a people. It helps us to interpret it and understand it better, and it helps us to see where God was in all the chaos and the mess. Probably most important of all, telling the story again helps us find our own way into the story and figure out why it is important for us today.

I think that Jesus hoped that his death would immediately bring about the Kingdom of God, defeating those who dominate others through power. Instead, it has been an ongoing confrontation with powers that seek of control-with glimmers of the Kingdom shining through in random moments.

Jesus asked his followers to choose to join one procession or the other that long-ago Passover day. My family? We chose to follow Jesus--and Mary and I followed him all the way to the cross. So...which parade were you in on that fateful day? Where are you today? From what I have seen, that makes all the difference in the world...shalom!