3-24/25-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Mk 11.1-11 Lenten Series

selected verses Mk 14-15 Palm/Passion Sunday Foolish Love…is Dangerous

Today is not a typical sermon, for this week is not a typical week. This is Holy Week.

This week we are invited to journey with Jesus through his final moments on this earth. From palms to table, from garden to courtyard, from the cross to the tomb, we are invited to journey with Jesus in order to contemplate the depth of God’s foolish love for us.

Yet when we take this journey seriously, we will also realize that following Jesus is a dangerous journey. It will lead us in ways and to places where we do not want to go. It will lead us out of our comfort zones, to confront our own hopes and fears. It will lead us to the cross…then through the cross to the empty tomb.

As we listen to Mark tell the story of Jesus, dare we confess the times we have betrayed or deserted or denied our Savior? Dare we admit the times we would rather observe than follow Jesus into the suffering and shame and struggle of our world? Dare we acknowledge how often we have asked God to lead us anywhere than where God wants us to go? Dare we be honest with our fear of the cross?

Still, God invites us. Still, God reaches out with forgiving love to us. Still, God calls us to be Christ’s followers.

Today is not a typical sermon, for this week is not a typical week. As we listen to Mark tell the story of Jesus, imagine yourself in the crowd, as a disciple, as a bystander, as a believer. What do you see and feel? Where do you falter, and where do you stand firm?

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We began this worship [with the joyful procession of the palms,] with the story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Imagine this grown man riding a small colt. Picture the cloaks and palm branches that are laid down like a red carpet honoring royalty. Listen for the shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!”

We may picture this parade as a joyful event, with bystanders caught up in the wonder of it all, and while this is true, in reality this parade was as political as students marching to protest gun violence. Into the volatile mix that was Jerusalem at festival time, with faithful Jews from all over the region descending on the city, and additional Roman soldiers present to make sure the Jews don’t try to subvert Roman authority, Jesus takes on the traditional images and route of a king—yet in his own, humble way, a way that declares Jesus is not the type of king the people are expecting. He is not present to overthrow Rome. He is present to overthrow death and despair and distance from God Almighty.

Jesus knew what awaited him by the end of that week in Jerusalem. Even as the joyful shouts of “Hosanna” rang in his ears, Jesus knew the week would end with shouts of “Crucify.” Palm Sunday may be a day for celebration, yet it always has an undertone of what is yet to come.

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Following his entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple, observed all that was happening in or near God’s holy dwelling place, then retired to Bethany only to return to the Temple the next day.

We often do not read the scriptures that tell us what happened in the days between Sunday and the Passover feast. Jesus did not stay in Bethany, but spent many hours in or near the Temple. He overturned the tables of the money changers. He constantly engaged in conversation with the Jewish religious leaders in ways that challenged their leadership and understanding of the Scripture. Jesus did not “play it safe” that week in Jerusalem. Instead, he lived with such passion and purpose that the religious leaders finally sought a way to get rid of Jesus once and for all.

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Listen to how Mark describes their desire and Judas’ betrayal.

Yet will it only be Judas who turns from Jesus during that holy week?

The story continues…

**Read** MK 14:1-2, 10-11, 17-31

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray Jesus.

When it was evening, Jesus came with the twelve. [to celebrate the Passover feast] And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.”They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?” He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread

into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine

until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But Peter said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same.

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This is the night for which they have traveled to Jerusalem. It was time to celebrate the Passover feast, to remember all that God had done for their ancestors when they had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt.

Little did the disciples know that in a few short hours, Jesus would suffer for the redemption of the world.

Yet Jesus knew what was to come. He knew that betrayal was in the heart of Judas Iscariot.

Had Judas given up on Jesus? Was Judas trying to force Jesus’ hand into a show of power and glory? Was Judas disappointed when Jesus appeared more as a servant leader than a military leader? Why Judas betrayed Jesus, we will never know.

Yet Jesus knew what was to come. He knew that soon he would be betrayed. And denied. And deserted. As much as he had sought to teach and prepare the disciples, Jesus acknowledged that they still did not comprehend his mission and his purpose. And when his hour would come, Jesus knew that his followers would be driven by fear.

If we are honest with ourselves today, when have we allowed fear to override faith in our lives?

When have we echoed the disciples in asking, “Lord, is it I? When have I betrayed you?”

In hindsight, can we confess those times when we have wanted Jesus to be different or act different than who he came to be? Can we confess those times when we have betrayed Jesus either through speech or silence, action or inaction? Can we confess those times when we are reluctant to give all of ourselves, to truly surrender all, in response to all that Jesus has done for us?

Jesus knows our struggles, and our confessions. And loves us anyway.

Thankful for Jesus’ sacrificial love, we ponder our confession and Jesus’ forgiving love every time we share together in the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

Jesus’ actions at that Passover feast may have appeared strange to his first disciples. For on that night, surrounded by his disciples, including Judas and Peter, Jesus took bread--blessed it-- broke it--gave it to them and said, “This is my body, broken for you.” Jesus then took the cup--blessed it--gave it to them and said, “This is my blood, a new covenant, poured out for many.”

That “many” includes you and I today. Give thanks for the holy mystery of communion, that reaches out in love and grace even to you and I today.

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I often wonder what the disciples thought of Jesus’ words and actions on that night. When did they begin to realize that night was like no other? When did they begin to recognize that being a disciple of Jesus was more dangerous than glamorous, more servanthood than power, more grace than law?

The story continues…

**Read** MK 14.32-50

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba,Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him.Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.” All of them deserted him and fled.

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Following the Passover feast, Jesus led his disciples to what I imagine was a familiar spot, for a familiar ritual—a time of prayer in the middle of the night. Away from the crowds, away from the censure of the religious leaders, Jesus would often spend late hours alone in prayer to His Heavenly Father.

The disciples were used to this routine, and so they struggled to understand that this night was different. They had spent a long day in Jerusalem, and a long night at the Passover feast. They were full, they were tired, and they did not realize the significance of this night.

How many of us struggle to stay awake during a 15-minute sermon or recital, let alone during an hour or two of prayer in the middle of the night after a full day and a full meal? We can sympathize with the disciples’ struggle to stay awake.

Can we also sympathize with the disciples when they all fled, after a crowd came to arrest Jesus, with one of their own as the betrayer? How many of those men believed they would be the next one arrested? Faith gave way to fear. Arrest and betrayal were not what they expected when they began to follow Jesus, when they marveled at this teachings and miracles, even when they shouted Hosanna just a few days prior to this night.

I always wonder, would I, too, have fled that night?

Apart from the struggle of his disciples, Jesus has a mighty struggle of his own. Jesus did not want to face the humiliation of the cross and the pain of the whip. He prayed in great anguish, “Abba, Father, remove this cup from me.” Yet Jesus also prayed with great trust in God, accepting that death was his destiny as well as his sacrifice of love, “yet not what I want, but what you want.”

How often are our prayers the opposite of Jesus, praying for what we want rather than for what God wants? How often are our prayers for ease and pleasure rather than suffering and sacrifice?

Jesus found faith and strength, hope and renewal in his set apart times of authentic prayer.

We can do no less.

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Following Jesus’ arrest, the disciples scattered. All deserted Jesus and fled. Yet Peter followed at a distance. When Jesus was taken to the high priest, Peter was bold enough to join the guards in the courtyard, warming themselves by the fire. Peter was not bold enough, however, to claim his place as a disciple of Jesus.

The story continues…

**Read** MK 14.66-72

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by.

When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.” But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

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On this final night with Jesus, Peter was a little concerned that he might be the betrayer Jesus mentioned, but he then brushed it off as nonsense. When Jesus again insisted that all of his disciples would desert him, impulsive Peter sought to argue with Jesus. “They may, but I will not!” When Jesus specifically told Peter he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crows twice, Peter again emphatically blew off any such action. “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.”

Mere hours later, we see Jesus’ prediction come true. Peter denies Jesus, then weeps, a broken man.

When have we denied knowing Jesus? When have we found it safer to not admit to being a Christian, knowing we would be ridiculed or dismissed or suddenly distanced from those around us? When would we rather be known as a good person than a follower of Jesus? When have we acted just like Peter?

Thankfully, Peter recognizes the gravity of his actions. And he weeps. And then after Christ’s resurrection he is chosen to take Christ’s message to the world, to lead the people of God to live and proclaim the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. I figure if there is the hope of redemption for Peter, there is the hope of redemption for you and for me.

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Redemption, however, comes at a price. The price of Jesus’ death upon a cross. Once condemned by the religious leaders, Jesus is taken to Pilate to be sentenced to death.

The story continues...

**Read** MK 15-1.15

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the festival Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.

Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”

For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you callthe King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

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The King of the Jews—sentenced to death by Pilate, to die by crucifixion, Rome’s way to inflict maximum pain for the longest amount of time. Rome viewed the cross as an instrument of death, as a deterrent against insurrection, as the ultimate humiliation for slaves and thieves and would-be Jewish messiahs.

On that cross, Jesus died.

On that cross, Jesus died for you and I.

On that cross, Jesus died to show us the depth of God’s foolish love for us.

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As you journey through the rest of this Holy Week, ponder what Jesus’ death on a cross means to you. Ponder God’s foolish love that reaches out to you. Ponder the agony of the cross, in order to be ready to receive the good news of resurrection.

The good news is…we know the end of the story! We know that next week, the grave cannot hold Jesus. God’s foolish love will reach out to us in an incredible way—resurrection!

Yet before we get to the joy of Easter morning, we are invited to journey with Jesus through his final moments on this earth. From palms to table, from garden to courtyard, from the cross to the tomb, we are invited to journey with Jesus in order to contemplate the depth of God’s foolish love for us. May we do so.

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In response to God’s foolish love for us, may we join together now in the Prayer of Confession (found in bulletin/screen)