

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

April 5, 2009 - Palm Sunday

“Why?”

Reverend Art Ritter

Mark 11:1-10

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² 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. ³ If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”’ ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

*¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

Mark 15:1-15

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. ² Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ He answered him, ‘You say so.’ ³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, ‘Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.’ ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

6 Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, ‘Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’ ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate spoke to them again, ‘Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?’ ¹³ They shouted back, ‘Crucify him!’ ¹⁴ Pilate asked them, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Crucify him!’ ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Rev. Mary Susan Gast, a United Church of Christ conference minister, describes in a sermon a visit to her grandparents when she was a very young girl. Her grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, natives of a remote village in Slovakia and saw the teaching of their customs and traditions as part of their duty as patriarchs and matriarchs. The particular memory that Gast wrote about was of watching a television program with Grandma and Grandpa on a Saturday night. It was a program that her parents probably wouldn't have let her watch but after all this evening was on her grandparents' watch! The program was called "Shock Theatre" and featured Bela Lugosi in the movie "Dracula." The film was frightening for a young child like Gast, and it ended the uncertainty about whether or not the evil vampire was dead or alive. At the close of the movie Gast said that she turned to her grandparents and looked for a word of reassurance. She hoped to hear something like,

“Remember child, that was only a movie. In real life vampires don’t exist.” Instead her grandmother calmly spoke from her small village Slovakian experience and in her wonderful accent proudly telling the child, “Is all true!” Gast remembers seeking a more positive kind of encouragement that frightening Saturday night. She wanted the night to end differently.

About four years ago, the Templeton Foundation spent \$2.4 million testing the effect of prayer upon health. I can only assume that the money went to the researchers, not the pray-ers or the patients. Some Christian groups were asked to pray for cardiac patients, starting the night before surgery and continuing for three weeks. The condition of the patients who were prayed for was then measured against other patients who were not lifted up in prayer. Alas, the study found that prayer did not accomplish anything. In fact, the study found that those who knew they were being prayed for developed more complications than those who weren’t certain in anyone cared enough about them to pray.

I found the results to be quite puzzling. One of the researchers said that the presence of a faith leader or prayer could cause greater anxiety among certain patients. Patients might come to think that they are sicker than they really are or have a problem they have not been told, if they know people are praying for them. I recall a woman that I visited in the hospital who said she really wasn’t concerned about her condition until she saw me there. Then she began to worry about how serious things really were!

A researcher at Duke University commented on the study saying he wasn’t surprised. He said, “There are no scientific grounds to expect a result, and there are no theological grounds to expect a result either. There is no god in either the Christian, Jewish, or Muslim scriptures that can be constrained to the point that they can be predicted.” He added that when we pray with human expectations that we are likely to be disappointed. God’s desired outcome may not be understood before or even after our prayers. In other words, God’s action in the world and within lives cannot be measured by human research or expectation.

An unpredictable God! Imagine a God that works outside the realm of our personal expectations! That kind of God seems to be active in the events that we observe during this coming Holy Week, described in the lengthy and extensive details by all of the gospel writers. These passion scenes of Upper Room and Gethsemane, arrest and trial, betrayal and denial, sentencing and crucifixion, are places where we might find God unpredictable and confusing, distant and even absent. The events surrounding the Passion of Christ are beyond our human understanding. They seem to describe a different side of a God than we would care to see, a God whose silence puts our trust and faith to the test.

This is a week in which we remember Jesus going through some incredible difficulties. He is rejected by those in important places and by the once-cheering crowds. He is betrayed and denied by his closest friends. He endures a trial, a beating, and finally hung on a cross. It is frightening and chilling. The fact that the Son of God would end up on a cross, a victim of violence and evil, is a horrible surprise. We might wonder why such pain and suffering must be part of God’s story. Why wasn’t Jesus rescued from his suffering? Why wasn’t he delivered from his cruel fate? Why didn’t God do something? The God we find in this story is a God who seems to raise more concerns and questions than confidence. From an outsider’s viewpoint, Maundy Thursday can seem like tragedy. Good Friday can be viewed as failure.

Perhaps part of the puzzling nature of Jesus’ passion is that the events remind us of our own suffering, fear, and uncertainty in this crazy world. We wonder about the cancer and the heart attacks. We dread the accident and illness. We tire of hearing about the wars and terror attacks. We seem to be at the mercy of runaway economy headed downward. Like the story of Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem, our story seems to be one out of control. We might ask the same kind of questions that the Biblical story raises, “Why doesn’t God do something? Why doesn’t God act to change the ending?”

During Holy Week, we would be very much like Governor Pilate, demanding that Jesus identify himself. But as the old spiritual says, “He never said a mumblin’ word.” Jesus was silent. That must have frustrated Pilate. It can frustrate us as we struggle with God. We want God to show us who

God really is and to demonstrate the power in a way that meets our expectations and reassures us of God's decent and rational order. In a Palm Sunday sermon, Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes writes that we want Jesus to spare us the embarrassment of this very tacky Holy Week scene, to free us and him from the humiliation of public failure. Gomes writes, "Spare us Jesus, if you are who you say you are...if you are the Christ, save yourself and us now."

But Jesus did not save himself. God did not act. Why?

As I contemplate the events we will observe this coming week, I come to the conclusion that perhaps the problem wasn't God's inactivity at all. Rather, the problem is that God didn't do exactly what we wanted. It wasn't that Jesus didn't do anything to change things in Jerusalem. He just didn't do what we wished he would have done. William Willimon writes, "We wanted Jesus to come into town on a warhorse; Jesus rode in on a donkey. We wanted Jesus to go up to the statehouse and fix the political problem; he went to the temple to pray. We wanted Jesus to get organized, mobilize his forces, get the revolution going and set things right; Jesus gathered with his friends in an upper room, broke bread, and drank wine. We wanted Jesus to go head-to-head with the powers-that-be; he just hung there on Friday, from noon until three, with hardly a word." And yet we know, as people of faith that God was there and God was acting in the midst of the story.

It surely seems as if our story isn't going where we want it to go these days. Our expectations of God's presence to the community of the faithful might draw a few doubts and questions. And yet we know, that even in times like these, God's people can find God's presence and learn much about their faith. We can learn to appreciate mystery even as we wish for certainty. We can learn that there is some value in suffering, even as we would prefer an easier fate. We can learn the power of discipline and sacrifice even as we long for days of plenty and places of comfort. We can learn humility even as we used to prefer acquiring more power. We can embrace the value of presence even as we prefer wish to offer a quick fix and easy answers to our friends and family.

As people of faith, we know that in our world and in our days, God still changes a life, heals a person, lifts up the fallen, rearranges a future, and lights up a corner of the darkness. It often doesn't happen as rapid as we wish it would. It doesn't come in the time that we might choose it to happen. It might not show up in the manner that we would expect. But it still happens.

I know that here at Meadowbrook we have at least two huge Boston Red Sox fans, Bob Smith and Brian Brown. One of the Red Sox's former players was the rather eccentric leftfielder Manny Ramirez. Manny is a great hitter but he has had his share of run-ins with managers, fellow players, clubhouse workers, and fans. He has been known to take innings and at-bats off, one time even taking a bathroom break during the middle of an important inning. Manny Ramirez may be in the Hall of Fame one day but he has never behaved like people wish he would. Before they tired of his actions and traded him to the Dodgers, Red Sox fans used to have a saying, "Let Manny be Manny." My daughter Maren even wanted me to buy her the t-shirt when I visited Boston. Let Manny be Manny. Don't let the carefree attitude and quirky behavior take away from your appreciation of him as a baseball player. Let Manny be Manny.

In the same manner Holy Week is a reminder that even in the midst of suffering and uncertainty, even in the midst of darkness and pain, we can let God be God. The facts of the story are not pleasant. The ending is something we would just as soon avoid. The actions of God fall way below our hopeful expectations. But we know that despite it all, there is redemption. Although the story may not progress in the manner in which we would write it, the story is authored by God. Jesus' suffering and death had a purpose beyond human tragedy. It happened so that he might enter into our brokenness, our pain, and our sorrow. The events we observe in this next week happened so that we might find life and have hope in the midst of what we experience here and now. Through the presence of God, all of our life and all of our experiences will be redeemed.