

Telling God's Story  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
Palm Sunday - March 24, 2024  
Mark 14:1-15:47

This is one of my favorite services of the year. I think that's because it has so much of the story at the center of our faith rolled into a single event. We began with the pomp and circumstance of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, riding on the back of a colt or donkey, and with people laying their cloaks and palm branches on the road and shouting "Hosanna to the son of David!" (and, let's face it, we Episcopalians really know how to put on parades). We hear next of Jesus' betrayal at the hands of one of his inner circle. We see that betrayal, combined with the animosity of the authorities, nail him to the cross. And finally, we are reminded through the bread and wine of the Eucharist that maybe he didn't really leave the building after all.

It's a lot to take in all at once – and it is a doozy of a story. It is our story. More than that, it is God's story, minus the actual ending. (That comes next week.) Most, if not all, of us have heard it before, so at times it probably hits somewhere between "old hat" and "a real snoozer of a rerun" more than we'd care to admit. And, I wonder: do we actually remember what it was like to hear it for the first time? How shocking is it, really to watch as Jesus goes from receiving a hero's welcome to having that same crowd turn on him entirely, and in the space of just a few days?

That it happened as it did should not have come as a surprise to anyone who was paying attention. And yet it does – in part because *nobody* believes Jesus when he describes exactly how it's all going to go down. Mark sets up that dynamic nearly from the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. When he starts teaching the disciples with parables – the pithy "the kingdom of God is like..." stories – he has to explain a lot

about what they mean. They fearfully question who Jesus is after he calms a storm and demonstrates that the power he has isn't earthly. When Jesus explains what being the Messiah will actually entail, Peter is the first to find out that it does not mean what Peter thinks it means. The other disciples don't fare much better. After the other two times Jesus explains what is going to happen to him when they get to Jerusalem, they respond by arguing over who is the greatest and asking to sit on Jesus' right and left hand in glory.<sup>1</sup> Despite how they've stuck with him for three years at this point, they don't seem to have learned all that much – and what they do know is about to be put to the test in the cruelest way.

It's worth noting that the people who are closest to Jesus are among the last to fully understand the truth of who he is. Notice that "... no human in Mark's narrative calls Jesus the Son of God. The title of the book declares it (1:1). The heavenly voice announces it at Jesus' baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7), but the disciples do not 'get it.' But finally one person does — the very man who crucified Jesus, the Gentile, the Roman oppressor, the centurion. When he sees Jesus die, he recognizes him: 'Truly this man was God's son' (15:39)."<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of the reasons why Peter and the rest just don't get it, what they participated in, and gave their lives to, as a result of meeting Jesus and accepting the invitation to come and follow him, was nothing short of extraordinary. Even in this last week when everything else changed, Jesus does not stop doing the same things he has

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<sup>1</sup> O. Wesley Allen, Jr., "Commentary on Mark 14:1-15:47." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sunday-of-the-passion-palm-sunday-2/commentary-on-mark-141-72-151-47> [accessed March 18, 2024].

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

been doing all along – and that includes showing flashes of his very human emotions. He curses a fig tree in a moment of frustration. He flips over the money-changers' tables in the temple. And he gets into verbal sparring matches with the authority figures there. Except this time, they're far less receptive to him, his message, and the truth behind them than the people back in Galilee were. And that, in the end, was the recipe which ultimately does him in.

Today, Palm Sunday, provides the "too long, didn't read" version, of the story of this entire week. That is, we get the basic outline, but without a ton of depth. The Prayer Book seems to assume the busy-ness of modern life doesn't let us take the time to enter into the depths of this week. Framing this service in the way that it does – that is, how it doesn't leave off with Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna – sends a clear message: "just in case you miss everything else leading up to Easter, here's the backstory." That the Prayer Book includes specific services for most of the rest of this week suggests that perhaps we should set that busy-ness aside, if only for a few hours. I invite you to join this community in breathing in the totality of these events... to listen to the laments for Jerusalem and experience the descent into darkness which are the backbone of Tenebrae... to take in the finality of that last Eucharist on Thursday night before the altar, and his presence, are symbolically stripped... to contemplate the emptiness left once he breathes his last... and finally to come back on Easter Day to hear the end of the story. Even if you can't... and if there is nothing else you remember about the events of this week... remember that it is God's story, and that God gets the first and last word in all of it.