

Sermon – The Journey Home
Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 14:1-11
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is found in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 50, verses 4-9a. We read one of Isaiah's suffering servant songs on this Sunday because as Christians, we understand Jesus of Nazareth to be our suffering servant. One cannot help but observe the confidence in the one who suffers on his journey home. The servant is able to endure suffering because he knows God as Savior. Hear now what the spirit is saying on this Palm Sunday.

*The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.
5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.
6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.
7 The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
8 the One who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.
9 It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? Amen.*

the beauty of holiness our Divine Redeemer journeyed home by way of the cross. Our gospel reading for today is Mark 14 and 15, two complete chapters that walk us down Jesus' road to Golgotha. We will only read the first eleven verses of chapter fourteen this morning; however, let us each take time this week to read both chapters. Mark reminds his readers that both the chief priests and Judas were looking for a way to arrest Jesus. However, this thought is interrupted with the story of an act of kindness—more than kindness—an expression of compassion and gratitude...a beautiful thing, as Jesus described it. A wealthy woman approaches Jesus and anoints his head with an alabaster of expensive ointment used to perfume the head or to anoint the dead. Hear now, God's holy word.

It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest Jesus by stealth, and kill him; 2 for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people." 3 And while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. 4 But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted? 5 For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. 9 And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Amen.

The title of the sermon: “The Journey Home”

*The text: “She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.”
Mark 14:8*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give each of us the courage to journey home with grace and to be generous with one another along the way. As we reflect on Jesus’ journey home, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In her book The Shelter of Each Other, family therapist, Dr. Mary Pipher talks about the importance of rebuilding our families. The title of her book comes from the Irish Proverb: *It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.*

One of the unintended consequence of the pandemic has been to rebuild our families. Certainly we have gained a new appreciation for the beauty of family as we have sheltered at home with each other. The love we have for our extended family and our spiritual family here at Westminster has deepened in the absence of physical presence and touch. It has also been a time to build character and to strengthen the sense of who we are in the challenges, the disappointments, and the losses we have persevered.

Mary Pipher reminds us in her book that it is difficult to have meaningful life journeys if we lack character and the sense of who we are—and it is challenging to be prepared for our journeys home without the support of a loving community, without the kindness and the shelter of each other.

As we commemorate Jesus’ journey home this Holy week, we are amazed at the confidence, the sense of self, with which Jesus travels. It is not a smugness or self-assuredness, which often hints at arrogance or self-righteousness. No, Jesus of Nazareth had an inner peace that comes from a complete trust in God and a humble conviction of who he was and who God called him to be.

When we understand Jesus in the context of the suffering servant song, which we read together in Isaiah, the strength of his character is heightened. It is precisely because of his confidence in Yahweh’s steadfast love and justice that Jesus can endure the hostility he encounters in the world. Jesus, the suffering servant, absorbs the hostility and in its absorption, the hostility dissipates...like a great stone thrown into a silent pond! Christ’s strength to absorb the hostility of the world on the cross reveals a healing and forgiving God. Jesus suffers, not because he has done something wrong. Jesus suffers because he does what is right, which rubs the powers that be the wrong way.

Each one of us has had to absorb hostility, especially when we advocate for others, and the best gift we can give our children is to empower them to become advocates for others and to risk in absorbing the hostility of the world when they do what is right. Another unintended consequence of sheltering at home for a year has been the growing mindfulness of systemic poverty, structural racism, and our own privilege.

If we want to be true to the gospel, we must acknowledge the suffering that is a part of life. If we only remember the shouts of Hosanna on Palm Sunday, we cut short the way that leads to Easter.

Not only is suffering at the heart of our faith it is also at the heart of our shared humanity. If we risk in being human, in loving, in serving, in celebrating life; we will know loss, disappointment, and sorrow. Part of the beauty of our faith is that we belong to a God who shared our humanity. Because Jesus walked this way, we can walk with courage and confidence...and we can provide a shelter for each other as we journey. We provide shelter, not with religious cliches that protect us from another's pain, but with our willingness to be present and to be kind as we acknowledge our shared pain. (pause)

In our gospel reading today, we find Jesus at the home of Simon, the leper with the diverse community of friends who are like family to him. While at Simon's, a wealthy woman, who is unnamed, anoints Jesus' head with an expensive alabaster of nard. It is worth more than 300 denarii, approximately the annual wage of a rural day-laborer! It is a generous and kind gesture; however, the woman is scolded!

Some are concerned that the nard is wasted and could have been sold with the proceeds going to the poor. No one would argue this point! Remembering the poor is a value that Jesus has taught throughout his ministry. Yet, in this moment the tenderness and the generosity of this woman is a gift to Jesus. He is mindful that he is on his journey home and finds comfort and strength in the shelter of her presence and her touch.

Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

To give to the poor is right but her gift to Jesus in this moment is of a different order of rightness. To anoint the head with perfume is aesthetically pleasing; however, the timing of this anointing is of a higher order of beauty. The beauty of her extravagant gesture is the woman's ability to be present with Jesus in his time of need. Jesus is about to die!! He knows it, she senses it, and while others are plotting their schemes and arguing about morality, this woman takes the opportunity to minister to the One, who has given her a sense of herself and a shelter in a hostile world.

What she had, she gave! What she had in her power to do, she did for the One who was about to give his life for her. Her deed springs from a deep sense of gratitude and love. It was an occasion to break all patterns, to defy logic and common sense, and to simply give.

Truly, I tell you, Jesus says, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.

It is in the shelter of each other that we live and die.

Each of us can journey home with confidence, tenderness, and generosity because of who our Savior is. Thanks be to God. Amen.