



The Strength To See It Through

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Mark 11:7-11a

And they brought the colt to Jesus, and threw their garments on it; and he sat upon it. And many spread their garments on the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!"

And [Jesus] entered Jerusalem...

Things are not always as they seem.

When Mark wrote about Palm Sunday in his gospel, he wrote about what Jesus saw with his eyes and heard with his ears. What Mark did not write about was what Jesus felt in his heart and knew in his mind; but that is where the real drama of Palm Sunday unfolded.

On the surface, it seems like that first Palm Sunday was a day of joy and jubilation. Jesus came to Jerusalem just as the Old Testament prophets had predicted the Messiah would come.

Zechariah wrote that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem "... on a colt the foal of an ass." (9:9) That's why Jesus rode in on a donkey.

The cheering crowds were excited. They spread coats and leafy palm branches on the road before Jesus. They shouted "Hosanna!" and that means "save us!" They repeated the words of King David, "Blessed be he who enters in the name of the Lord!" (Psalm 118:26)

They said, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David." When they said that, it was an out-and-out declaration that Jesus was their expected Messiah. They called him their king, their savior, their Messiah.

Judging by what the eye can see and the ear can hear, Palm Sunday seemed like a festival, a street party, a day of promise and celebration. But, things are not always as they seem.

Beneath the surface celebration, even as Jesus was receiving the adulation of the crowd, Jesus knew what was coming. He knew those cheers would turn to jeers, those hosannas would descend into hisses. Things were not as they seemed. It was not a triumphant culmination. It was the beginning of a test, a test that would only grow more severe during the week ahead.

What do you suppose Jesus was thinking as the cheering crowd surged around him and swept him into the city? Perhaps he let his mind drift back a few centuries to the prophet Isaiah. Maybe he remembered a particular scripture passage from Isaiah 50: 4-7

The Lord God has given me... to sustain with a word him that is weary... and I was not rebellious... I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting... I have not been confounded... I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.

Jesus knew that Isaiah had experienced in some measure what Jesus, himself, was about to endure.

Like Jesus, Isaiah's job was to "sustain with a word" those who were weary. Like Jesus, Isaiah listened to God. Like Jesus, Isaiah did "not rebel" or "turn back." Like Jesus, Isaiah was fearless in telling the people the message God had given him.

To preach God's word courageously is always hazardous duty. Isaiah learned that. Jesus knew that. But the similarity between the two didn't end there. Just look where obedience to God got Isaiah: he was physically attacked. People struck him, insulted him, and spit on him (v. 6). Hiding in the shadows, they attacked him emotionally. They spread gossip about him. As long as they could stay anonymous, they criticized him. They never did "stand up" and "confront" him face to face (v. 8).

The people of Israel had two main complaints against Isaiah. First, they found his preaching offensive.

They were offended when he condemned their nation's leaders (chapter 28).

They were offended when he said the policies of the government were unjust (chapter 10).

They were offended when he said they should not put all their trust in the strength of their army (chapter 31).

The men were offended when he denounced their idolatry (chapter 44).

The women were offended when he criticized their moral complacency (chapters 3 and 32).

Across the board, what the people of Israel wanted - and pay attention to this because it hasn't changed at all over the intervening thousands of years - they wanted a preacher who would pander to them, a preacher who would tell them what they wanted to hear, a preacher who would affirm the values and ideologies they held most dear. And woe to any preacher who didn't oblige the people.

The second complaint they had against Isaiah was that he liked strangers as much as he liked them. They thought God liked them best, that they were God's favorites, that they were better than any one else - and along came Isaiah who kept looking outward to "all people" (see 40:5, 49:26, 66:23). He said things about God loving the foreigner and the outsider just as much as he loved the Jews. Isaiah refused to confine his ministry solely to his existing congregation! And his congregation didn't like that one bit!

Jesus could think back on Isaiah's life, and he could identify with so much of it. Because:

Like Isaiah before him, Jesus offended people with his preaching.

Like Isaiah, Jesus ministered as much - if not more - to the Gentile/outsider as he did to the Jew/insider.

And Jesus knew that in the days ahead, like Isaiah, he, too, would be giving his back to those who would strike him. He, too, would not hide his face from insult and spitting. He, too, would face betrayal and abandonment and suffering.

There comes a time in the life of every servant of God when the will to continue is sorely tested. That first Palm Sunday was the beginning of that testing time, and Jesus knew it.

The time comes when the criticisms cut too deep,

- when the cost seems too high,
- when the controversies seem too much to bear,
- when the loneliness seems overwhelming,
- when the desire to quit is most alluring.

Isaiah knew those feelings. I suspect Jesus flirted with those feelings that first Palm Sunday.

Jesus watched as the fickle crowd cheered his name, knowing how soon they would turn against him with a savage fury. Jesus surely knew the feeling on Maundy Thursday as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on Good Friday as he hung on the cross.

But things are not always as they seem - because right at that very moment, when the temptation to give up is strongest - that's when God gives his servant the strength to see it through.

God somehow enters the weak and hurting heart, and resignation gives way to resolve. Suddenly, "in the twinkling of an eye" (I Cor. 15:52), someone who was ready to quit God's service feels ready to take on the world.

As Jesus looked at the crowd around him that first Palm Sunday, as he contemplated what lay ahead during the ordeal we call Holy Week - Jesus was not fooled by the flattery of the Palm Sunday cheers.

I suspect Jesus was comforted by the knowledge that other faithful servants of God had taken similar paths before him.

I suspect he was sustained by remembering Isaiah's faith -- a faith that told him that come what may, God was always near.

And, I suspect that Jesus knew that God would give him the courage he needed to stay the course,

- and the strength to see it through.

What happened that first Palm Sunday was unique to Jesus - no one had ever been like him before and none have been like him since; but the inner script, the feelings of the heart and the fears of the soul - all those inner doubts and concerns, hurts and hopes - all those emotions which Jesus felt - those are common to us all. Those emotions are played out in our own daily lives.

After all, it isn't just saviors, and prophets, and preachers who are criticized by others. They're not the only ones who suffer slings and arrows - or moments of doubt and despair. At one time or another - every person faces trials which test the spirit. Every person is subject to the tyranny of tears and fears.

When you come to one of those times in your life, what you need most is the strength to see it through.

You learn this early in life and never escape it.

By the time you reach your teenage years, you have learned it. During those frustrating, confusing years called adolescence - there are times when you don't think you can see it through.

One day you feel all grown up; the next day you feel like a child.

One day you're wildly in love; the next day your broken heart teaches you a painful lesson about friendship and commitment, betrayal and disillusionment.

One day you're told the future is yours for the taking; the next day you see a world in chaos and wonder how kindly the future will treat you.

From the time you're young, you want to know where the long arc of life will lead you; but, of course, you never know what the future will bring.

Through the years, the one thing you need to learn is that a faith in God makes tomorrow's uncertainty much less terrifying. In faith, you learn that the God who offers help is near -

- no matter what happens in the years ahead,
- God will be there with you at every twist and turn in the road,
- God will give you the strength you need to see it through,
- and maybe that's all you really need to know.

If you have teenagers in your home and in your life, are you teaching them that? Are they going to learn that God will see them through? Are they learning that from you?

Of course, as you grow into your adult years, you need that same kind of faith. As you become adults, whole new sets of complications confuse your life: relationships, marriage, parenthood, responsibilities to make a living and support your loved ones, the hard economic times, and all the other pressures of life. There are going to be times when you don't think you'll make it. That's when you need that strong foundation of faith to see you through.

That kind of faith is even more essential when you grow old, when you struggle through what's supposed to be your "golden years."

Imagine taking your eyesight or your hearing for granted all of your life and then suddenly finding that it is failing you.

Imagine being active and "on the go" for as long as you can remember, and then finding yourself virtually confined to your home. Imagine having legs so unsteady that a simple fall can be a catastrophe, or having bones so brittle that they break even as you sit in a chair.

Imagine having to give up your home, along with all the furniture and accouterments which have been part of your life for too many years to count.

Imagine living long enough to watch all your brothers and sisters and your lifelong friends die one by one, until everyone who knew you in your prime is gone.

Imagine that! And I ask you: how many setbacks and losses is the human spirit able to take before melancholy becomes a permanent companion? How much of that can you stand? How much can you handle until you don't think you can see it through any more?

No matter what your age or circumstance - how many fears flood your mind at night as you lie in bed? How lonely do you sometimes feel? How often do you feel like giving up? How many tears come to your eyes?

That's when you need the kind of faith that will see you through! Courage is not a matter of having no doubts or fears. Courage is doing what you have to do in spite of your doubts and fears.

Do you have the kind of faith that gives you the courage you need to face each and every day? That's the kind of faith Isaiah had when they gossiped about him, when they spit on him, when they attacked him. That's the kind of faith Jesus had when he was swept into Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd. And, that's the kind of faith Jesus kept when the cheers turned to jeers, when the hatred exploded, when the whip was given, when the nails were driven. That's the kind of faith he had as he hung upon that cross. He had the kind of faith that was strong enough to see him through.

Do you have that kind of faith?

During the Cold War, one of the more famous dissidents in the Soviet Union was Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989), a prize-winning nuclear physicist.

Sakharov was absolutely determined to publish his memoirs, and the Soviet government was absolutely determined to see to it those memoirs never saw the light of day. Eventually, the memoirs were smuggled out of the Soviet Union, but the story of how hard it was to write them is almost as interesting as the memoirs themselves.

Time and again, Sakharov would write a section of his book, only to find that it had mysteriously vanished from its hiding place. Once, the half-written manuscript was stolen from a dentist's office. Sakharov gave his wife the news with trembling lips and a broken voice. Another time, when the project was nearly completed, it was stolen from a secret hiding place in his automobile. His wife said that when he discovered it was gone, he looked like he had just been told his best friend had died.

But each time, after pining a few days in discouragement, Sakharov would sit down and start writing again. Some parts were written better than before and others worse, but his wife explained how the book finally came to be:

“My husband has a talent (I call it his main talent) to finish what he starts.”¹

On Palm Sunday,

- look beyond the waving palms and triumphant parades to see Jesus facing his future,
- quiet the cheering crowds and listen closely,
- dig deep, under the surface to understand how Jesus struggled to find the courage he needed to finish what he started,
- forget about honor and praise -
 - for honor can be a frivolous reward
 - and praise is at best a fickle friend -
 - honeymoons end, bubbles burst,
 - and friendly crowds dissipate,
- but, Jesus shows you that what matters most is how you respond when the hour of testing draws near.

At every stage of life, there will be problems that dishearten and discourage you, but if you've got the faith you need, they will never defeat you. There will be difficult situations which challenge you to the very limits of your endurance, but if you've got the faith you need, they will never crush you.

Have you got the faith you need? The faith to keep putting one foot in front of the other? The faith that tells you no valley is walked alone? The faith that tells you the final victory will be yours?

Oh, my friends:

- after the years have piled up,
- after you've trudged through those deep valleys,
- after you've faced all those trials and troubles,
- after you've dealt with the problems
- and mended your broken heart -
 - when all is said and done -
 - if you've had the faith you need -
 - you'll be able to look back at your life and say:

“Sure, it was hard. Sometimes I didn't think I'd make it.

¹ Elena Bonner, *Alone Together* (translated by Alexander Cook, Knopf Publishers, New York).

“But now I know: I didn’ t travel that hard road alone.

“Now I know: no matter how arduous or overwhelming it seemed at the time, God was always there, helping me every step of the way.

“Now I know: it was by his grace, I kept the faith. By his power, I finished the race. By his spirit, I found within myself the strength to see it through.”