

Mark 11:1-11
Philippians 2:5-11
Creekside COB
April 5, 2009

“Prep Work”

While sorting through my mother’s unpacked boxes, I found one with my name on it. I opened it, removed the packing paper, and smiled. Mom had kept all the crafts I made in Cub Scouts, forty-seven years ago! They took me back to Mrs. Wisebaker’s basement where Pack 10 met every Wednesday after school. As I took the artifacts out of the box, the words, “Be Prepared,” came to mind, as well they should. “Be Prepared” is the Cub Scout’s motto.

The motto stuck with me “*selectively.*” I work at sermon preparation with Cub Scout diligence, but it’s not easy *or possible* to do week in and out when other needs demand attention. When I cook, I get as much enjoyment from the prep work as I do pulling it all together in the finished dish. Sue and I are going on a fishing trip in May. She will attest that I spend hours organizing and replenishing tackle boxes, spooling reels and making sure the boat is in working order.

Whether preaching, cooking or fishing -- whether teaching, performing music or skydiving, whatever the task, success is predicated upon careful, thoughtful preparation. Or, as my old friend, Howard Uhrig used to say, “*Those that fail to plan, plan to fail.*”

You cannot overemphasize the importance of preparation. So you might be thinking I didn’t prepare for today. If I had, I would have known this is Palm Sunday, and what does it have to do with the Cub Scout motto?” Nothing... at least not at first glance. But upon closer inspection, a connection between preparation and Palms set into motion the story of Jesus passion and death.

The master preacher, Tom Long, observed something odd about Mark's account of Palm Sunday. For three years the disciples followed Jesus through dusty towns and villages -- three years of teaching, healing and challenging the foundations of religion and government. Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem where he would confront the forces that conspired against him. It was apparent to people who heard Jesus and witnessed his healing mercies that he was the Messiah.

Jesus approached the city from the Mount of Olives, to fulfill the prophecy from Zechariah 14 which said God would defeat the nations from the Mount of Olives and restore Israel.

The big drama was coming to the big stage. The prep work had been tended to -- almost. This is where Mark's version of Palm Sunday gets unusual. The drama present in the other gospels is missing. Over half the story is comprised of dull details about two disciples dispatched by Jesus to fetch a colt.

Put yourselves in their place. Jesus is about to take on Rome and restore Israel. As part of Jesus' inner circle, you assume you will have an important role in the unfolding drama. Jesus calls you, and another disciple and says *"Go to the village, get a colt and bring it to me."* "What else?" they ask. *"Nothing else-- just get the colt."* "While we're there do you want us to do some reconnaissance work?" "No." "Shall we hand out leaflets?" "No." "Do you want us to get to Jerusalem ahead of you and stoke up the crowds?" *"No... just get the colt."*

Think about it. You left everything to follow Jesus. You waited three years to be part of this moment, only to be told by Jesus to fetch a spindly-legged colt. I hear you saying, "I didn't sign on for this! Give me something important to be remembered by."

Tom Long conjectures that the unnamed disciples were James and John. We last heard from them in chapter ten. They took Jesus aside and said, "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you. *We want to sit at your right and left in glory.*" "You don't know what you're asking," Jesus replied. "Who sits where

in the kingdom isn't my call to make." Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he tried once more to penetrate their thick skulls:

"You've seen how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant. The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served..." (Mark 10)

James and John dreamed of sitting on velvet cushions. They wanted to be in the spotlight to show how important they were. Instead, Jesus sent them to the theological woodshed. "You're on donkey detail."

Here we are again. God's heart pulses the message throughout the New Testament. God's saving work in the world is made visible through acts of servanthood, not displays of power.

I was licensed to the ministry in 1974. The choir at my home church sang at the licensing service. I remember the refrain of the anthem: *"Lord, send us men for this crisis hour."* I recall thinking, "Crisis? What crisis? No one mentioned a crisis. I'm just sticking my little toe into the shallow end of the pastoral pool. What do I know about handling crisis? I'm only nineteen!"

Eight years later I stood before the Crest Manor congregation at my ordination. The District Minister asked me:

Will you, with God as your helper, carry out faithfully the obligations of the ministry: preaching the Word to the age in which you live, visiting the sick and brokenhearted, seeking the lost, comforting the troubled and distressed, and by word and example leading all with whom you minister into the fullness of the grace of Christ?

With the wind of the spirit billowing my sails, I said, *"I will."* I hadn't bothered to read the fine print elaborating on the "extras" I would be called to do. In addition to preaching, teaching and pastoral care, I went to the church every Sunday at 6:00 A.M.

during winter to turn up the heat in the sanctuary. I ordered bulletins and wrote the newsletter. I unclog church toilets, record Phone Tree messages, pick bulletin art, unloaded delivery trucks, flip pancakes, run people to the drug store, do fish fries, make frantic phone calls all over Elkhart and Goshen looking for palm ash because it is two hours before the Ash Wednesday service and I can't find ours, and I talk to and pray with people in comas, who, if they recover, won't even know I was there.

Most pastor goes through periods of thinking that ministry should be more inspiring. "How am I supposed to lead people to new heights in worship and depth in spirit and commitment to service when so much small stuff begs for attention? The disciples weren't the sharpest knives in the drawer. They misunderstood Jesus, but they were obedient. Suppose James and John didn't bring the colt to Jesus? No colt, no triumphal entry, no hosannas. Finding a ride for Jesus doesn't seem like much. But let me tell you something-- small, seemingly insignificant acts done for Jesus ARE big deals.

Mark used a literary device well known in his day. The gospel is constructed such that the first reading of it doesn't come together without returning to earlier themes. Remember that Mark doesn't begin with Jesus' birth. He opens with John the Baptist "*preparing the way of the Lord.*" (Mark 1:3) Jesus sent the disciples out to preach and heal, and do mundane tasks as well. They prepared a boat to take Jesus across the Sea of Galilee. They did a head and food count before Jesus fed the 5,000. He told two disciples to go into the city and look for a guy with a water jug on his head. "Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?'" (Mark 14:14)

Prep work is another name for discipleship, which might include:

- Washing all the little panes in the worship center doors like Deana did yesterday, realizing that a pleasing entrance can

prepare someone's receptiveness to receive a gift from Jesus in worship.

- Preparing the prayer garden to make it an inviting space where people can better listen to God...
- Assuring a dying friend fighting for her last breath, whispering in her ear, *"It will be all right..."*
- Listening to someone pour out their pain at having lost their job, their insurance, their marriage and home...
- Hearing Jesus say, *"Follow me,"* and spending an afternoon with a suffering person who doesn't know which is worst, her cancer or the treatment...
- Scribbling notes on paper late Saturday night, preparing to teach church school in the morning...
- Standing outside Keith Hostetler's room on Wednesday, over-hearing a Benedictine nun say to Keith, *"Your church family must love you very much."*

Tom Long says, "Preparing the way of the Lord,' in the routine, often exhausting, seemingly insignificant donkey-fetching details of our service are gathered into the great arc of Jesus' redemptive work in the world."

We've come to church on Palm Sunday long enough to know that the coronation of the palm parade's grand marshal is his death. On the other side of Jerusalem, another parade thundered in. A victorious general rode a white stallion at the head of a procession, followed by rank upon rank of Roman soldiers with sunlight reflecting off their helmets and shields. Behind the soldiers stumbled enemy prisoners in chains who would either become slaves or be executed as an example of Rome's power.

Compared to this procession, Jesus' entry looked ridiculous. He rode the wrong animal for a king. People who lined to road didn't wave swords, but palm branches. They didn't chant, "Hail

Caesar!" They cried, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Jesus hardly looked like he was headed into battle. When it was over the king was dead. The arms he bore weren't a threat, but were the means by which he would claim victory. Jesus used the only weapons God made available for him -- truth, peace and love.

Jesus was a fool, they said. Truth against Rome's authority, God's peace taking on Pax Romana, the peace of Rome that was enforced by terror, love staring evil in the eye without flinching.

The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. Perhaps some of us will consent to making fools of ourselves, preparing the way for Jesus through small acts of obedience, holding in our hands only what Jesus held in his -- peace, truth and love.