

“So Full of Life”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

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Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 50: 4-11 Mark 11: 1-11

Isaiah 50:4-11 (NRSV)

⁴The 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. ⁵The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶I 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. ⁷The 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; ⁸he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ⁹It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. ¹⁰Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God? ¹¹But all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands. Walk in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that you have kindled! This is what you shall have from my hand: you shall lie down in torment.

Mark 11: 1-11 (NRSV)

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and 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. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Sermon

So Full of Life

The disciples toss some blankets on a colt.
Jesus settles on its back.
Into Jerusalem they go.
Jesus of Nazareth and his followers enter the city with great fanfare.
Many people spread their cloaks on the road.
Some spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.
Children wave and point at Jesus, hoping to get his attention.
The disciples shout out hearty invitations to join in the march.
They shout sacred scriptures, holy words of joy and hope.
"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"
Hosannas and alleluias fill the air.
Their cheers start slowly--only a few voices at first.
As more and more people join in, the cheering gathers steam, volume, passion.
A casual onlooker feels a stirring in her soul of fresh possibility.
The teacher who's been waiting all his life for the Messiah
suddenly dares to hope against hope.
The widow who so misses her dear one
lifts her chin to see the procession,
and senses God's presence, and her dear one's presence as well.

From His vantage point on the colt,
Jesus sees that while there are people on both sides of the street
there is plenty of room for more.
He catches his followers' eyes and points over yonder.
Like Jesus, the disciples get it.
They call out to the folks in the marketplace;
to those in surrounding fields and farms;
and to those leaning out windows and now-open doors,
curious about the happy sounds and shouts and commotion
on this day that had started out so average.

So Full of Life

Dalit is near the city well.
The hem of her dress is wet, splattered with mud from the ground around the well.
Dalit's back is sore.
Her hands are blistered from drawing water by the bucketful,
up, up, up from the deep.
"Dalit, come and see!" shouts Shayna, her cousin, who lives next door.
"Jesus of Nazareth is marching on Jerusalem! Hosanna!"
Dalit hesitates.
She's heard of this Jesus.
His reputation precedes Him.
He is a good man, a man of God, some say.
There are whispers that this Jesus is the Son of God.
Would this godly man have anything to do with her?

She looks at her calloused palms and strong arms, feels sweat on her brow.
She is from Samaria.
If she offered Him a cool drink of water,
 would He, a Jew, accept her offering, accept her, a Samaritan?
Would He judge her, condemn her, rebuke and rebuff her approach?
Would He demand she be cast away from the city, sent back to her war-torn land?
Shouts and cheers are louder now.
Marchers come 'round the corner.
The procession brings them so close to the well she can see the man on the colt.
Jesus peers over the crowd and waving branches.
He looks across at her.
Their eyes lock.
He lifts his right hand, makes the shape of a cup.
He brings an imaginary cup to his parched lips, nods and smiles at Dalit.
"Yes!" she says aloud, surprised by the lightness in the sound of her voice.
Dalit laughs as she scoops up a nearby chalice,
 fills it to overflowing and moves toward Him.

So Full of Life

Asher stands on the side of the road.
He sees the marchers a way off, coming toward him, noisy, ecstatic, almost chaotic,
 Jesus calm, astride the colt, sun glinting off the silver of the bridle.
Asher reaches down for a stone to throw.
He lives in Bethany, a town just outside of Jerusalem;
 he rode into the city expressly to confront this radical, this so-called rabbi.
Now he is going to get his chance.
He searches underneath a nearby tree.
He finds several good-sized rocks, which he places in his pouch.
The procession arrives too quickly.
He's exposed, out in the open, not hidden like he intended.
Suddenly the crowd gets quiet.
Too quiet, too still.
Uh, oh.
He looks up.
The radical, so-called rabbi is right here, looking at him.
"Asher, put down your stones."
"Wha...what stones?" He hides his dusty hands behind his back.
"Get back on your cart, Asher. Go home and prepare the fatted calf,
 for I am coming to your home tonight!"
Indignant, put on the spot, exposed in public, Asher speaks his mind.
"What are you talking about? I don't want to talk with you.
 I don't want to be seen with you, especially not in my house!
 We have nothing in common. You talk with sinners.
 You hang with lepers and Roman soldiers. You're too political."
"Asher, my friend, my fellow child of God.

I am so blessed because I get to visit with all of God's children,
including you.
When what we believe and how we practice our faith intertwine,
become one in love and truth,
there is no separation between our words and our actions,
for we are being and sharing the grace of our Creator.
If what you may mean by politics is how power is used and resources dispersed,
then as people of deep faith you understand that you and I and all of us"
--here Jesus opened his arms to indicate the whole crowd—
"all of us need to address decisions made and impacts therein.
Or, should God not be present in the room where it happens?"
"Jesus, this is a crock. I don't believe a word you are saying."
"And I am not asking you to believe me or to believe in me, Asher.
I am inviting you to be faithful to the God of Life.
We're not all going to agree politically or theologically or practically,
yet there is room at the common table for all of us.
Hey Asher, there is room at your table for all of us!"
"My table? You're not kidding? You're all coming to my house?"
"Asher, you've a story I need to hear."
"Story--what story? Jesus Christ, what are you talking about?"
"Asher, I want you to tell me the story of your life, your pain, your loss,
your faith journey, dreams that have come true and those deferred.
Tonight, Asher, you will tell me, and I will listen."
"By the way, Jesus, how did you know the fatted calf is ready?"
"You will be blessed, and a blessing, Asher, and God will be praised."
In the stillness of the moment,
the only sounds anyone hears
are the stones falling from Asher's pouch and hands,
and his footfalls as he strides with purpose toward his cart.
And Jesus said, "Blessed is he who goes forth in the name of the Lord."

So Full of Life

Penina's mother had grown up on the coast,
diving for clams and collecting pearls for the marketplace.
So, when her daughter was born, naming her Penina, pearl, her pearl of God,
seemed as right as rain.
Neighbors noted that pearls of wisdom fell from her lips,
for she was wise beyond her 11 years.
Penina stands in front of her home
as the procession of messiah and missionaries draw closer,
blankets on the road, branches in the air,
shouts and cheers rattle the walls.
She looks up at Jesus of Nazareth and God's people around her;
her heart is filled to overflowing.
She experiences pearls of wisdom being gifted to her from the Holy One.

She sees the diversity of her city collecting and moving forward with purpose.
She hears exclamations of praise and prayers of hope.
She feels that every person has the same inherent worth.
She thinks that in her first 11 years,
 she has seen incredible acts of mercy, and some actions which concern her.
She understands firsthand that life is difficult, and can be so heavy, so burdensome.
She recognizes that her spiritual community should not place burdens on people;
 rather it should lift them, carry them,
 carry her and her family and friends and the newcomers ‘round the way.
She likes the way this Jesus of Nazareth is so full of life and love and laughter.
She likes his eyes, and the steadiness of his presence.

Penina reaches for a low-lying branch on a shady tree.
She pulls it off.
Holds it high above her.
“Hosanna!” Penina shouts as she moves toward the man who loves her as she is.
 “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“If this young person is silenced,” said Jesus, “the very stones would cry out.”

So Full of Life

Then Jesus...went into the temple;
 and when he had looked around at everything,
 as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!