

Riding On
The Monroe Congregational Church
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John 12:12-19

In the Gospels, we are presented with information about Jesus: what he did, what he said, and who he was. But we are given very little to go on when it comes to what he actually thought or pondered in his heart.

One exception is the forty-day period of temptation in the wilderness at the very beginning of his ministry. The other is his last night in the Garden of Gethsemane... a night we now call Maundy Thursday. In the wilderness at the beginning and in the garden at the end we get an unexpected glimpse into what he was thinking and feeling.

In the wilderness, Jesus was developing physical and spiritual discipline, bulking himself up for what lay ahead. We hear him respond to his body's hunger by saying that there are things more important than food when he says: "*One does not live by bread alone*". In the Garden, we hear him beg for permission to run away from what's in front of him: "*Father, let this cup pass from me*", he fervently prays.

Yet, in between these two points in time we don't hear much else about his feelings, just some stories about his teachings, healings and other actions.

So I'm left to wonder... what if all that time Jesus kept a journal? What do you think would be in there? Do you think Jesus would admit that on Palm Sunday he was greatly tempted to turn the donkey around and go the other way?

I know that there have been many times in my life when I have wanted to turn the donkey around. Have you? Have you ever wondered if the road ahead that you have chosen is actually the right or the wrong direction?

My most gut-wrenching wrong way experience was in Bridgeport a few years ago. In the midst of a lot of heavy traffic at night driving home alone from a foster parenting class, I got confused and turned the wrong way onto a busy one-way street.

Just like on Palm Sunday, there were crowds of people. But they were all in their cars. I can tell you that they were definitely not shouting, "Hosanna!" at me! Instead of waving palm fronds, other driver waved middle fingers as I

was pulled over by a police officer. Just talking about it, remembering how disorienting and scary it was, still gives me the chills. I had made a mistake and had to turn the car around before driving sheepishly home.

I wonder if Jesus had that nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach that day. With such a public display, he was putting not only his own life but the life of his followers in danger. Even if he knew what he was doing, some of those disciples might have wished that he would just turn the donkey around and return to the relative safety that had been his ministry so far.

We mostly relate to Jesus as God, but remember he was also human. That is what makes him GOD-with-US. Imagine with me what Jesus might have pondered as he rode through the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, knowing, or at least strongly suspecting, that many of the people who cheered would turn on him.

We often read this story as the beginning of the betrayal of Jesus, but we might also consider that some at the parade would come to believe Jesus had betrayed THEM. That he had gone the wrong way. The religious authorities were rightly concerned when they said, "*Look the whole world has gone after him.*" They might have been happy if Jesus had just turned the donkey around and ridden off into oblivion.

Do we know who Jesus was? Who Jesus is? Was he the incarnation of God or just an admirable man? A gentle shepherd, or a good teacher, or a political organizer? Christian theology tells us that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, that is what all the traditional creeds say. He was and is the one who makes it perfectly clear that God is with us; and also that God is not above and beyond being hurt by human weakness and evil.

Jesus is the one who was so trusting of his heavenly parent, that he could ride through the adulation of the palm-waving people shouting Hosanna without being diverted. The crowd wanted a miracle worker who would cure all their diseases and raise them from the dead; they wanted a larger-than-life hero who would overthrow Rome. They wanted a way out of it all.

But Jesus knew...the only way out of grief and disappointment and sorrow is through it.

Jesus is the one who could have a last supper with his friends, knowing each one would fail, deny and betray him. Jesus is the one who could hold fast to his convictions even during the pain and humiliation of a crown of thorns being placed on his head. Jesus is the one who could go to his death praying for those who put him on the cross: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*"

I am certain that being fully human Jesus had moments of doubt and agony that week. On Palm Sunday, after the parade, Luke's Gospel says that he wept over Jerusalem, and maybe even for himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, his sweat fell like great drops of blood as he prayed. The struggle expressed by his fervent prayer was just as much internal as it was external.

Perhaps what was facing Jesus was both what he wanted and what he didn't want. Sound familiar? Remember some gut-wrenching experience you have gone through or are going through now? Feel that icy fear in the pit of your stomach if you really want to know who Jesus is and what Holy Week must have been for him.

Holy week is a paradigm shifter. It is the ultimate experience of being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, and returning no one evil for evil.

Jesus had the power of trust and concentration; of reliance upon the faithfulness of God to work for good in all things.

And yet, I do not believe that Jesus was predestined to do what he did. Yes, he was brought to Holy Week because of his very close relationship with God; through the earlier decisions he had made in his life; through the experiences he had with people who loved him; through the teachings of his mother Mary and other prophets; and through his own sense of purpose and calling.

But I also believe he could have made a last-minute change of plans. He could have turned the donkey around. If he had done that, he would have relieved his immediate anxiety and would not have had to sweat blood in the Garden. Instead, he chose differently. He remembered what he had prepared himself for way back there in the wilderness at the beginning. And he saw it through to the end.

Jesus made the decision to ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, pretty much knowing what might lie ahead, at least as far as Friday. It was in his determination to ride on, and not turn back, that he made resurrection possible.

Now we know, more than 2000 years later, that we, too, can be of good courage, hold fast to that which is good, return no one evil for evil, and live through it all.

Riding on. Riding on with that icy feeling in the pits of our stomachs. That icy feeling may not be just our human fear, it may actually be a God-given sensation to help us pay attention to the direction in which we travel.

This is the beginning of our Holy Week journey and what we'll see as we travel this road to freedom is that it is costly. It means sacrifice, and perhaps even some danger. Power resists liberation, and those who benefit from that system resist it's change. Sometimes we who can see the injustice and still benefit from that system resist it, too, because it means giving up privilege we might have, or dealing with change.

And change, as we all know FAR too well, is hard.

Yet the road is here, in front of us, a road that asks us to consider our values, especially in a time of prolonged crisis, and to reach for the Kin-dom, that is right here among us if we have the wisdom and the courage to see it.

And Jesus, even 2000 years later is still asking – who wants to travel the road along with me? Amen.