Making Preparations

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Mark 11: 1-11; 14: 12-16

Growing up as a Southern Baptist in Mississippi we did not celebrate Palm Sunday. I’d see Episcopal or Methodist friends after church with palm fronds made into crosses and didn’t have a clue as to what they were about.

The purpose of any Sunday, especially Easter Sunday – or Palm Sunday, was to get saved. That was it. All the preparation that went into it was about salvation. As a teenager I wanted to be saved. I got baptized and expected there to be fireworks. I should have seen the world in vibrant colors, kinda like when you fall in love. Shouldn’t the greens be more vibrant, the blues more intense, the reds pop out, the yellows creamier?

Didn’t happen like that. And I had questions. Isn’t it all about giving the right answer and after that there is nothing to worry about?

Answers are important. But the best answers very often lead to other questions. Is there something more?

Jesus’ disciples had some questions: where are we going? When will we get there?

Jesus said – we are going to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Passover was the Jewish religious celebration that recalls the exodus from Egypt. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt Moses went to the Egyptian Pharaoh and said – *Let my people go!*

Moses said this not once, not twice but 10 times. The first 9 times the Pharaoh said – no and the Lord sent a plague – the river Nile turned red like blood, then frogs overwhelmed the land. There were boils on people and livestock and thunderstorms and hail. After each plague the Pharaoh relented – but then his heart was hardened – he changed his mind. And another plague came.

Finally, Moses went to Pharaoh and said –if you do not let my people go, the Lord will pass over this land and take the first born child of each household. Pharaoh remained steadfast and said no – again.

The Lord told Moses how the children of Israel could avoid this plague. Moses received the instructions for a sacrifice – each home was to offer a lamb and take the blood of the lamb and place it on the lentil and doorpost. Then they were to prepare a meal – not a heavy banquet but a meal that could be eaten quickly for when the Lord passed over the children of Israel would quickly be released.

The Pharaoh and the Egyptians did not receive this instruction. And when the Lord passed over their households, their first born died. But when the Lord saw the Israelites had made a sacrifice and prepared, they were spared. Sure enough the Pharaoh relented and children of Israel began their exodus journey.

They are told to remember this event and its preparation. The words of Exodus command them to share this as a “perpetual ordinance.” Indeed, the Passover is a celebration of liberation.

Preparation for the Passover required getting ready. The preparation paid off.

This was the “festival” that Jesus and the disciples were going to Jerusalem to participate in. As they went Jesus sent 2 disciples to obtain a colt so that he could ride into the city. Jesus told them that if they were asked by anyone what was going on, they were to say – *The Lord has need of it and will return it.*

Then after a few days, Jesus sent 2 others to locate a place. So they went and found the place as Jesus had told them.

Somehow along the way there was preparation. That preparation was to provide the place for this event. But there was so much more than just a celebration. For the people involved were brought together for a larger purpose. Sometimes when we are drawn into a purpose we do not comprehend all that is at stake.

When two people have a relationship – at work, at home, in school, in our community – when we are in a relationship, we use a third party to provide stability. Jesus was in a relationship with his disciples. The Passover celebration was what they were focused on doing. So Jesus sent disciples to make the preparations. They found the colt and the room that was needed. If you were to draw it out, it would be like a triangle.

Triangles are very durable forms. They are all around us. One thing about a triangle though is that any one of us can only affect the person/s we are connected to. We can’t make the connection of the 2 we have a relationship with. They have to be responsible for their own connection. It is lifelong work of preparation.

Think of a father and son as the father teaches the son about how to throw a ball. The father can show the son how to hold the ball and what to do with his arm, when to release it or shoot it or whatever the sport for the ball requires. But the father cannot do this for the son. The son must learn on his own.

The same for a mother who teaches her daughter how to ride a bike. Training wheels can be used, Balance can be shown and taught. But there comes that moment when the training wheels are taken off and the daughter must be on her own.

We know that not all teaching about sports produces star athletes. And when you learned to ride a bike there may have been a spill or two. But in each of these kind of moments you have lived through with children or or-workers or friends or neighbors.

Each of us as individuals and in the church are responsible for our relationships. We can develop, nurture share and love in all of our connections. But we cannot make other people do things that we want them to do.

Jesus told the disciples where to go to make the preparations. And they did. Jesus shares with us his command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as our self. We too have preparation to make.

Sometimes despite our best effort at teaching and coaching and instructing the other person isn’t as successful as we want them to be. Sometimes when we get right down to it you and I don’t do what we think needs to get done.

Think about a person you are connected to in some way – maybe in your family or here at church, maybe at work. Think about how you are connected to them – who are the other people or projects or identities that hold you together.

Think about your connection to faith and what relationships you have with them. What are the blanks you have for yourself? Where have you made preparations – that worked? Or did not come out as you intended.

The critical factor in all of this is that there is connection and community. What I didn’t realize all those years ago was that being “saved” was not just about a one-time event. I was about showing up and finding ways to be connected to God and to others.

Scott Black Johnston is the pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He spent a few years in Atlanta as pastor at Trinity Presbyterian. He shares this story in one of his sermons[[1]](#endnote-1):

*. . . I was standing in the Dresser/Methven Funeral Home in Mora, Minnesota.  Outside the snow was swirling, and the local radio station was predicting white-outs on the roads.  Inside I was pacing up and down, trying to make small talk with old family friends from a town that is no longer my home.  The most significant presence in the room, of course, was my Dad who was laid out in an oak casket--dressed in the blue suit and Black Watch Tartan tie that my brother and I had picked out.  My mind was reeling with the kind of crazy mixture of emotions that being in the presence of a dead loved one seems to bring on.  I wasn't sure whether I could stand being in that space much longer; and yet, I knew that this is where I had to be.  It was precisely at that moment that two members of my congregation, Ann and Bob, walked into the funeral home.  At that moment, my mind could not square their presence with my location.  I looked away, and then I looked back.  Sure enough, there they were, two representatives from the Christian household.  It is impossible to describe the power of that moment.  I felt... sort of... well... "saved."*

Several years ago I had a similar sort of experience. My father had died on the Saturday before Easter. It was not unexpected. But it was still a shock. The memorial service was held at the Black Mountain Presbyterian Church where my parents are members. The church I served at the time was 4 hours away in Raleigh. At the reception at the church Bob and Mary, Judy and Denny walked into the room where my family and I we greeting people.

Scott Black Johnston put it this way:

*To be approached by friends in a time of great need is to experience a fierce solidarity that smacks of the holy.  I have got to believe that this is, in part, how God saves us.  God doesn't fax salvation in from some suite in heaven's ritzy district.  God comes.  God incarnates.  God steps out of grandeur to stand with us in awkward places at awful times to experience life and death.*

Salvation is not just about getting something. It is about making a relationship with God. And as you make a relationship with God, you extend your connections with other people. Like Jesus as he entered Jerusalem for the Passover, we make preparations with others. We build our connections and share our responsibility. Sometimes things don’t work. But we keep asking questions. We keep showing up. As we do that we experience the power of love and the wonder of hope. These are the preparations we make as we face down the coming Holy Week – Jesus will be betrayed and killed. Yet we know that there is a power beyond ourselves for God’s goodness and grace.

Thanks be to God.

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1. Scott Black Johnson, Day 1, 2009. <http://day1.org/1240-save_us> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)