

April 9, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Palm Sunday

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*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage,
at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,
“Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied,
and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.
Matthew 21:1-2*

I don't know exactly when or where I learned it – perhaps it was in a high school English or Speech class – the “it” being the formula, the methodology, for how to convey information in a paper or a presentation. The threefold instruction that says, Tell people what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Then tell them what you told them.

I think the idea behind this advice has to do with clarity and consistency. 'Tell people what you're going to tell them' is about making sure that the presenter or writer is clear about the ideas they're trying to share. The 'Tell them' part makes sure that the substance of their message supports their thesis statement, what they said they were going to talk about. And the 'Tell people what you told them' is meant to give the audience a clear summation, reinforcing what's been said all along.

The life and ministry of Jesus follows this same pattern. Near the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, just after he was baptized and called his disciples to journey with him, Jesus does his first big preaching gig, the 'Tell them what you're going to tell them' part of his 3 year presentation to the world. His preaching took the form of the Sermon on the Mount – it was Jesus' manifesto, which laid out everything he believed, everything he stood for, everything he would (eventually) die for.

Blessed are the poor and the meek and the sorrowful and the persecuted – God has

a special place in God's heart for these folks that the rest of the world so often overlooks. Jesus told the crowd listening to him that they were salt and light – wondrous, miraculous gifts created by God to be spent in service to others, to make the world more salty and more light. Love your enemies. Don't judge. Don't try to get even with those who hurt you. Practice humility. Love and respect and honor one another, and in so doing, demonstrate that you love and respect and honor God. There is no commandment greater than these.

The 'Tell them what you're going to tell them' part? Done.

Then Jesus spent the next three years putting flesh and action on those idealistic words, embodying exactly what it means to love everyone, including enemies. How to care for and serve others, feeding and healing them. How to stand up against power and authority, especially on behalf of the people most often overlooked or victimized by the structures of power and authority. Jesus *lived* the “Tell them” part.

And now, as he's about to make his way into Jerusalem, on the way to his arrest, trial, and death – Jesus launches into the final piece of his presentation: Tell them what you told them.

The gospel describes the scene, and every detail is crucial, loaded with meaning. I recall one of my seminary professors, a New Testament scholar, who was fond of saying that “everything signifies.” Nothing that Jesus did here was by happenstance.

As Jesus and his friends approach the big city, they stop just outside of town, and he instructs two of the disciples to go ahead into a village and bring back a donkey and her colt that are tied up in a particular place – an arrangement that clearly was made in

advance.

Jesus' choice of animals conveys a certain meaning, as well, because a donkey, even when full-grown, isn't a very big animal. Can't you just imagine how terribly awkward and out of proportion were this beast and its rider? Jesus' feet may have almost been hitting the ground.

And then there's the crowd, laying down their cloaks and branches from trees, paving and marking what might seem to be an impromptu parade route, but which, at least at first, was likely about as spontaneous as a modern-day flash mob or a song-and-dance number from *The Music Man* or *West Side Story*. This entrance was planned, and it had a purpose.

We can better understand that purpose if we remember what was going on on the other side of Jerusalem. It was the practice of the Roman occupying force to bring extra troops into the city when large crowds of Jews were expected to visit, like at the time of the Passover festival. The Romans made a big show of their military might, with pageantry and precision, columns of armed troops marching in formation or riding on large majestic horses.

The Roman parade carried the message of “power over”; Jesus' parade was about solidarity with. The Roman parade was about force, might, hierarchy; Jesus' parade was about presence and invitation. The Roman parade demanded awe and submission; Jesus' parade inspired trust and hope.

The Roman subtext was that if you step out of line, we're here to get you. The message of Jesus was what he had been telling people all along: if you fall short, if

you're hurting, if you're alone, God is here for you.

Simon Sinek is a writer and speaker who writes and speaks about the intricacies of leadership, making a distinction between *leaders* and *those who lead*. In his book, *Start with Why*, Sinek points out that, “Leaders hold a position of power or influence. Those who lead inspire us. Whether individuals or organizations, we follow those who lead not because we have to, but because we want to. We follow those who lead not for them, but for ourselves.” (*location 78 of 269, Simon Sinek, Start with Why*).

By Roman standards, Jesus wasn't a leader, as his quirky, unorthodox parade demonstrated. On the face of it, the power and the influence – the ability to regulate and rule lives and authorize deaths – was all in the hands of the Romans, with their grand parade on the other side of Jerusalem. But, clearly, Jesus falls into Simon Sinek's category of those who lead. Not only because he was consistent and clear about the way he delivered and lived out his message, but because what he had to say and what he had to offer was what people, especially powerless people, wanted; what people, especially broken people, hungered for: hope, dignity, worth, love, purpose.

The people who lined the streets and waved their branches on the day of that first Palm Sunday parade were shouting “Hosanna” at Jesus....a word derived from Hebrew, whose meaning had evolved over centuries, from being a plaintive cry – “Save me, please” – to a cry of relief, “Salvation has come.” The crowd that followed Jesus through the streets that day were casting their lot with him, not realizing, most likely, the sacrifice and heartache that the week would bring, but so desperate for the Good News that Jesus embodied, and the freedom which resurrection would bring them, that they didn't yet know was possible. *Amen*.