

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 11:1-11

## TAKING A GOOD LOOK AROUND

In her book, *Penguins and Golden Calves*, Madeleine L'Engle tells a true story about a family who has a two-and-a-half year old daughter and is expecting another. The parents do all they can to soften the displacement that the young girl might feel, encouraging their daughter to hold and to help change the baby. Everything is fine until they try to put their daughter to bed soon after her little sister has come home from the hospital. She says to her parents, rather frantically, "I want to see the baby." "Well, of course, darling, we'll take you to see the baby," the parents reply. "No – alone." "No, Mommy or Daddy will go with you." "No! I want to see the baby alone." Knowing enough about their eldest daughter that she is not going to let it alone, the parents reluctantly succumb to the little girl's request and let her go, by herself, into the nursery. She bends over the cradle and says to her baby sister, "Tell me about God. I'm forgetting." (Copied from *Oak Hill News*, Vol. 59, No. 4, April 2009, p. 1)

That really is the problem, isn't it? With all that we've got going on in our lives – busy schedules, one appointment after another, go here then there to pick up and deliver the kids, work at the office, chores at home – we fill our lives with meaningful and, at times, meaningless activities, and we crowd God out of our busy lives. We really don't mean to do so, but our lives quickly get full and we either forget all about God or, at the very least, we forget to make time for God.

That is one of the reasons why Holy Week is such an important time in the life of the Church. Holy Week gives us the opportunity to slow down, to remember God, and to recall God's love for us all. Holy Week begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Here, we see a premeditated act; Jesus methodically planned this event by making prior arrangements to secure a colt that had never been ridden before. Surely, he had in mind the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem the crowd greeted him with unbridled enthusiasm. Some spread their cloaks and others placed leafy branches on the ground before him, and the entire crowd cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" While "Hosanna" means "Save us," the implication is for a deliverance, which has political or military overtones. In other words, the people mistakenly believed that Jesus has ridden into town in order to get rid of the bad guys. They thought that God was about to act and free them from their Roman oppressors.

Jesus' symbolic actions delivered a different message than what was popularly expected. The crowd anticipated a Messiah, who would roll his sleeves up, flex his muscle, and get to work clearing their land of the despised enemy. What they got instead was a lowly Messiah, a suffering Servant, who came forth to contend with and conquer the greater enemies of sin and death.

When the Palm Sunday parade was over, Jesus dismounted and went into the temple. He took a good look around at everything, and then he returned to Bethany with the twelve. We can only imagine what Jesus saw as his gaze swept around the temple area. Quite likely, Jesus saw the corruption and the distraction of the merchants selling their wares and engaging in money-changing; in fact, in Mark's gospel, Jesus did something about those dishonest dealings and the disturbance it brought to God's house of prayer as he returned the next day and did a thorough "Spring house cleaning!" Perhaps Jesus saw the religious authorities as they whispered and plotted to have Jesus killed in order to silence, once and for all, this rabble-rousing rabbi. Maybe Jesus saw too many people simply going through the motions of their religion while void of a relationship with the living God. Or, thinking of one of his earlier parables, Jesus could've taken note of those worshipping in the temple, who felt far superior to the sinners and were too proud for their own good. Without a doubt, Jesus looked around and took stock of all, who had sinned and fallen short of God's glory, who sought to earn their way back into God's favor,

who were in the grip of death. Surely, Jesus looked around and saw that he had God's will and work cut out for him - work that would inevitably lead Jesus to betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, death... and beyond.

We can only surmise what Jesus actually saw when he took a good look around in the temple. But, what about us? As we stand with the crowd along the parade route in order to cheer Jesus on this Palm Sunday, and as we stand next to him in the temple, what do we see when we take a good look around? If we look with eyes of faith maybe, just maybe, we will realize and appreciate the humility of God and how our Lord will stoop very low in order to gather us all into the kingdom. If we take a good look at God revealed in Jesus Christ, we will see that God loves us enough to serve us and suffer for us, even die on a cross for us, in order to reconcile us to God and each other.

If we take a good look – not so much around us but within us – surely, we will see our sinfulness and our brokenness. And, if we can see and admit that much, and if we will truly repent of our sins before God and the sorrow we have caused others, then, we are in a position to see our need for a Savior. If our eyes, our hearts, and our minds are open wide enough, we can see and remember our Lord Jesus, who died on the cross for the sins of the world in general, and your sins and my sins in particular. By his reconciling death on the cross, our sins are forgiven and our relationship with God and each other is restored. If you want proof of that fact, you only need to look as far as the Lord's Table where Christ, the Host, bids us to sup with him and all others.

Finally, as we remember this God, who stooped so low as to ride a donkey, wash his disciples' feet, and then to suffer and die on the cross, we must take a good look at ourselves and ask the question, "If I am created in God's own image, do I look like God, do I act like God, who is revealed in Jesus?" In one of the Pontius Puddle cartoons, the main character wonders aloud, "I wonder if God can really hear me." In the second frame, he shouts up to God, "Hey, God! What should I do with my life?" In the third frame the Voice from heaven answers him, saying, "Feed the hungry, right injustice, work for peace!" Pontius yells up to God: "Just testing!" And in the last frame, God answers him, "SAME HERE."

If we take a good look around... better yet, if others take a good look around, will they see us and say to them selves, "There goes a disciple of Jesus Christ. I can tell by the way he or she serves and loves one another" - to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens

First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA

April 5, 2009 (Passion/Palm Sunday)