

On the Move
Palm Sunday 2015
Mark 1.1-11
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People were always following him. Mark's gospel tells us it happened *immediately*, but maybe it wasn't really always so simple. John was out in the wilderness telling everybody that something was about to change. Someone was about to mix things up. Somehow, some way, God was going to move in ways that they wouldn't want to miss.

And then he arrived at John's feet to be washed in the river, and the heavens ripped open at the sight of him. He stayed in that wilderness by himself to wrestle in the darkness, and the wild things and the heavenly things stayed right there with him; almost like they were following him, too.

When he was done, he started moving. He found Simon and Andrew and James and John right in the middle of their work days. They had nets and knives and fish and boats. They had family and work staff all around them in the heat of the day. But he invited them to join his walk, and they did. They stopped what they were doing and started following. Just like that. *Immediately*.

He was preaching, teaching, healing, and cleansing. He'd heal a woman, and she'd *immediately* start serving him. He'd heal a leper, and the word would spread so fast that he couldn't stick around for another day because people were swarming him. So he went out into the country to get away, and they found him anyway. Drawn to him from every quarter, Mark puts it.

Not everyone was happy about this, of course. Anyone who starts shaking things up and drawing a crowd is going to get some negative push back. But even those who didn't understand what he was saying or why he was doing what he was doing seemed drawn to him. They came to him to argue, to disagree, to criticize, to show deep concern, to correct. They couldn't just ignore him or let him do his own thing on the hillside, the seaside, the countryside. They went to be where he was.

He kept moving from place to place. He argued, he taught, he healed. He ate, he fed, he blessed. Soon people were lining up to bring their children to him just to be near him; just to receive a word of kindness and a wave of blessing over them. They kept following.

⁴⁶Then one day they came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard who was near, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." ⁵²Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." *Immediately* he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

From Jericho, they went on to Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives. He sent some of the ones who were following him to fetch a colt. He told them where to look, what to find, and what to say when people asked. They obliged, kind enough to not ask questions about odd requests. And when he was ready to ride the thing into town, they threw their cloaks across it for him. And then more people began to throw down their cloaks just like old Bartimaeus did. They added leafy branches they'd cut out in the fields and shouted out to him as he passed, "Hosanna!" "Son of David!" "Be blessed! We know you have come in God's name!" They shouted praise and joy. They also shouted "Save us!" "See us!" "We pray God is near!" They shouted out because he was passing by. They shouted out because he was their last hope. They shouted out because no one knew what he might do. He might heal or bless or exorcise or feed or bind up or release. They shouted out because they held onto hope that some of that releasing might blow their way as God must surely be on the move.

We know they did this not because Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell some version of the story but because we're still doing it right now. We're here for any number of reasons today: tradition, obligation, a favor, loneliness, curiosity, eagerness, chasing joy, holding onto hope that release may pass our way and that God is still moving. We want to see what happens when Jesus passes by. We whisper prayers and sing hymns. We hold space in our pew and receive a word. But sometimes, some days, some weeks when we have just about had enough, we want to cry out, "Save us!" "See us!" "We pray God is near!" "Be blessed if you come in God's name to make us whole." "Hosanna."

We've tried in so many different ways to be made whole, and we've even tried to chase Jesus down for our healing. There was the adolescent hope that if everything lined up just right and we didn't make too many mistakes, then God would reward us with a perfect plan revealed in perfect time that would guarantee a perfect life. But lo and

behold, it didn't happen that way. So we tried other things. We lined up perfect words and perfect faith in anxious hope that God would reward us with a perfect life *after* this one, but even that hope didn't get at that thing gnawing within us. We thought all of this rightness and perfection was chasing after Jesus, trying to keep up, trying to deserve to catch him, to catch a blessing, to catch a glimpse of God. Then as we journeyed, we made some discoveries.

We want to be seen now, here, in this life and on this day. We want to be made whole for ourselves, for our family and friends, for the good of the world as it is right now. We want to be blessed in God's name, we want to bless others in God's name. Immanuel—God With Us. Hosanna—Lord Save Us. In our searching we have come to know that we want Divine Presence for this life today.

A new journey. As our focus shifts away from perfection and away from getting every detail right and away with obsessing with what God might do on the other side of the veil between life and death, we learn new things about each other and ourselves and about what God might be like. Like blind Bartemaeus, we sense that God is near in the person of Jesus Christ passing by, and we know that his presence brings our wholeness today.

On this journey, we start to discover that following Jesus isn't about perfection or getting life and belief all right and all at once. Instead, following is about one choice at a time and then one life shift at a time. "What do you want me to do for you," he asks. What are we asking for on this way? What form might God's peace and wholeness take in our lives and in our worlds? What do we want from this Jesus? At some point, hopefully, we began talking not just about what he might do for us but about how we might exist with him. We begin to understand life and faith as journeying with...walking alongside...being on the way.

We're trying to follow Jesus. We used to sing about this in four-part-harmony with our hands barely resting beneath the hymnal...

*I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back*

He keeps moving forward and wants us to follow, and this week is a hard one to keep following as his journey leads him toward the cross. He makes unexpected choices. He zigs when we think he's going to zag. He makes the choice we don't think he'll make.

His judgment and anger speak right to the hearts of religious people, like me, working firmly in an established tradition. His grace and generous way are shared broadly with the world. His frustration is with those of us who keep forgetting this is a way, a following, a process. Instead, he wants us to let go of our rigid structures and follow his steps. Into the streets, into community, into real life, into God's way of love. *No turning back, no turning back.*

Whenever we are tempted to make the way of faith about individual perfection or group competition (that is to say, who gets it most "right" and who is least "right"), Thomas Long reminds us, "It is right at this place...that Mark imparts some of his best theological wisdom. He begins his Gospel with the exhilarating trumpet call to 'prepare the way of the Lord,' but he makes it clear, by his description of the disciples' activity in the rest of his Gospel, that the way to do so is not by becoming a member of the Knights Templar and gallantly defending Christendom, but rather by performing humble and routine tasks. The disciples in Mark get a boat ready for Jesus, find out how much food is on hand for the multitude, secure the room and prepare the table for the Last Supper and, of course, chase down a donkey that the Lord needs to enter Jerusalem.

Whatever they may have heard when Jesus beckoned, 'Follow me,' it has led them into a ministry of handling the gritty details of everyday life."¹

They, like us, are people following Jesus and calling out for help. *Good! You're here! Be blessed! Save me. Help me. Change my life. Pull me out of this.*

To get this help from Jesus, they have to keep up. He keeps moving on to the next place, the next task, the next town. Jesus spends much of his time in the gospels on his way to somewhere else. Those who follow his steps slowly discover this moving, responding, healing, teaching work that guides his life is ultimately the way that is guiding ours. And it is ours, not mine. It is ours, not yours. This is a communal journey; we're on the move together.

Eugene Peterson writes about the ways God moves through community in the small twists and turns of local, personal relationships, saying, "God means to do something with us, and he means to do it in community. We are in on what God is doing, and we are in on it together.

¹ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3389>

And here is how we are in on it: we become present to what God intends to do with us and for us through worship, become present to the God who is present to us.”²

With the cross before us this week, we are invited to reflect on what this way means when it is a way of suffering. Peterson invites us to watch the week unfold, particularly as our attention turns to the symbolic, eucharistic table. As we talk this week about taking, blessing, breaking, and giving, we are being invited into that way. That “life now shapes our lives as we give ourselves [to the way of] Christ in us, to be taken, blessed, broken, and given in lives of witness and service, justice and healing.”

When we cry out with the crowds, “Hosanna! Be blessed! God is near! Save us!” we are inviting God to be present in our lives, and our best response is to follow Christ’s way with our lives.

Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

² Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, pp. 5-6