

Carrying the Beat
Mark 11:1-11
Palm Sunday
28 March 2021
sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae

In June 1883 in the magazine *The Chautauquan*, the question was put, “If a tree were to fall on an island where there were no human beings, would there be any sound?” It is a philosophical question that most of us are familiar with today. “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” After much debate the magazine went on to answer the question with “No. Sound is the sensation excited in the ear when the air or other medium is set in motion.” Therefore, according to this magazine the question is not philosophical at all, but purely scientific. Since sound is vibration, transmitted to our senses through the mechanism of the ear, and recognized as sound only at our nerve centers, if there are no ears to hear, there will be no sound.

I think faith is a lot like that too. What is faith if we don't feel it and respond to it?

And the Palm parade in our scriptures is a perfect example of that. Had there not been a group of people who heard the particular

drum beat that Jesus' ministry created, the beat of freedom, hope, and justice this story would have looked a lot different. It would have simply been a man riding into town, down the Mount of Olives on a donkey, in silence. But there were people who heard his message and felt it in their bones, they added to the music and created a thunder that would draw attention away from the other parade that was happening in town that day, the parade of the Romans, the parade of the world as it was, not the world as it could be.

To really understand the particular drum beat that Jesus was playing that day you need to understand a little bit about the situation in Jerusalem as it was in that day, not really so different from the world that we know today in fact. Coming up to Jerusalem from Jericho, Jesus and his disciples would have likely fallen in with hundreds of other pilgrims who would swell the population of the Holy City from about 40,000 to more than 200,000 for the celebration of the Passover feast. Passover was a time of celebration, but it was also a time of high tension in Jerusalem. While the festival celebrated liberation from the tyranny of Egypt generations before, first-century Israel was still under foreign domination. The Roman occupation of their homeland chafed at many people, tempering the joy that was

supposed to be part of the festival. Riots and uprisings were fairly common during the Passover, so Rome made sure that there was a military presence during that week, garrisoning more troops at the Antonia Fortress, which overlooked the temple complex.

The procession of Roman governor Pontius Pilate and his accompanying military force coming into the city from the west provided that military deterrent during the festival. Pilate often had Roman soldiers, dressed as Jewish civilians and armed with hidden clubs, mingle with the shouting crowd and attack the people at a prearranged signal if any unwanted resistance to the Roman occupation was seen. Many were killed or hurt. That was one parade that was happening that day.

On the east side of the city, though, another parade was being planned and the people in Bethany and the little village of Bethpage began to feel a different beat inside their bones, excited by the arrival of one who would hopefully be a different kind of ruler. Jesus sent his disciples to get a colt, which we assume was a small donkey (Mark isn't specific). When the colt has been secured, Jesus rides it down the steep road from the Mount of Olives to the Golden Gate of the city, with a crowd of his supporters shouting "Hosanna!" — a Hebrew

word that mixes praise to God with a prayer that God will save his people and do it soon. They spread their cloaks on the colt and cut branches from the surrounding fields — actions that were done only in the presence of royalty. Trust me, they weren't laying down cloaks and branches for Pilate nor were they contributing any music of their own for Pilate's procession.

As spontaneous as Jesus' actions on the Mount of Olives seem, as random as his instructions to bring him a donkey to ride into town appears, make no mistake, this was a very well orchestrated political protest, designed to set up an intentional parable and statement of contrast. If Pilate's procession embodied power, violence and the glory of the empire that ruled the world, Jesus' procession embodied the kind of kingdom that God was ushering in through Jesus' ministry of healing, his message of good news and, ultimately, his death on a Roman cross. And this of course would set the stage for the strange and mysterious event of Easter morning, and the knowledge that even in the midst of extreme darkness and oppression God was bringing to life new understanding, new life.

The palm parade is simply a way to help us understand God, in our terms, in terms of the world as it is, even today. The palm parade

enables us to see a God that does not seek power in the way that the world seeks power. We learn about a God that wants to turn our world upside down and bring justice and freedom to those who are oppressed. We see a God who knows that the road ahead travels through moments of darkness and fear, but who is determined to lead the way through it all to something better, something life changing. The question becomes, which parade do we want to follow? The parade of Pilate, the parade that sees this world and the situations that we find ourselves in only as they appear on the surface, only from the perspective that is most familiar to us, or do we want to follow the other parade, the one on the east side of the city, the one with a very different tune?

Which do you feel calling you, deep in your bones? Which drum beat do you hear in your soul? Which parade will you be a part of?

Everything would be so much sweeter, so much easier to understand if the gospels just ended with Palm Sunday, but it doesn't, and questions like these, the tough questions of who we will follow matter today, and will matter even more in the days the ahead. If the Gospels ended up Palm Sunday the Gospels would be incomplete,

and our understanding of God would be mute, like that tree falling in the forest. We would have no choices to make, and our faith would be a lot thinner for it, our faith would be incomplete. If the Gospels ended today we would think that the palm parade was Jesus' biggest moment, and worse, we would think that God was only there, only able to be known in the good times of life, when the hosannas can be heard and the people are rejoicing.

But there is so much more to our story, and so much more we need to understand, so many more ways for us to be involved. There is so much more to our faith. For those who are brave enough to continue the journey into Jerusalem with Jesus, for those who are brave enough to stay even when the parade ends, they will find that while the music seems sweeter when there are many to hear it, even when so many go home it is never really silent. No, if we find the courage to stay after the crowds have all left we will see a man approach who will teach us that death has no hold over us and no darkness can fully overpower us; we will meet a man who reminds us that God is for us and with us, even when it seems everyone around us has fallen silent.

The journey must be travelled and we will do so to the beat of a distant drum of hope and promise; knowing that each step takes us closer, let us ride on.