

A long, wearying walk

Palm Sunday, 2011

It has been a long walk from Galilee, almost 45-50 miles down the eastern side of the Jordan, then back across the river to the ancient oasis of Jericho, the City of Palms. It has been a wearying walk.

Crowds have flocked to Jesus—blind beggars crying out for light. Jesus has preached, but almost nobody has really heard him. His words seem to have been caught by the wind and blown away. Jesus keeps saying that service—even suffering—is the only crown worth wearing. The crowd hears only babble and blasphemy. Jesus keeps saying that the powerless—like tag-along children—wear God’s kingdom more easily than folks looking for a crown. The crowd hears only babble and blasphemy. Jesus says that poverty under love’s rule is a more golden legacy than all of Palestine under any other regime. The crowd hears only babble and blasphemy. This is Jesus’ last will and testament, and they don’t even notice.

All this preaching to the wind has worn out Jesus’ heart more than his sandals. Jericho, the lush, ancient city of palms, is a welcome oasis on this barren journey, but it’s only that. Jesus and the disciples leave it, heading up and over the harsh, bare back of Mt. Quruntul, aiming southwest toward Jerusalem. After 10 or so miles more, they arrive at Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, and it’s only a couple of miles across the Kidron Valley and up, into the holy city. Jesus has walked away from the Pharisees and Sadducees of Galilee and toward the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jerusalem, the most indignant religious powers in the land. They are angry. They are scheming to trick him. They are scheming to discredit him as a popular rabble-rouser. If

the crowds don't retreat fast enough, maybe the high priest can order Jesus' secret arrest and shut him up for good.

Jesus has said just about all he can say, anyway. He has countered every question. He has sounded God's impending reign like a trumpet. If these folks want any part of it, they need to listen carefully—they need to listen to the still small voice of God beyond their debates, amid their debates, beneath their debates. They're missing the voice of God as it walks and talks right there among them as the Word made flesh.

Jesus can read the weather. The air is sunny and warm, a perfect day for a walk to Jerusalem, peaceful. But even two miles out of town a crowd begins to swarm and buzz around him, like hornets without a hive, noisier with every step they take. There's the clop, clop, clop of hooves in the dust. Sandals flap against feet as the boys in the crowd race back and forth. The sound of this human sea rolls like waves around him. A raucous laugh goes up here and there, unfurls itself like a banner above them. The excitable ones retell the past week's dramas. A few debate the midrash from synagogue. A child lost in this thicket of strangers calls out for his mother. Peter's insistent voice occasionally breaks through, challenging, as usual. The procession rises in one long crescendo, till disciples round a curve and collide with the local crowd.

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” the cry goes up, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Coats in loud colors mark the road, and boys in trees toss palm branches down to the crowd. They wave them like pennants for the home team, as the entourage bursts into Jerusalem like a storm. City-dwellers lean out their windows to understand it, hustle out their doors to join the ballyhoo. “Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!” they

cry hoarsely. “O save us! O save us! O save us! O save us! ” They mean it as a cheer for Jesus’ triumph. They cannot yet hear the real meaning—his descent and theirs, the sound of fate sinking like a rock into a dark pool, down into the depths where only the voice of God reverberates. It’s just one man on a donkey’s foal, a sign of peace the eye of this storm, this thundering, swirling cloud of rural folk.

“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.” That one note divides the crowd, like one silent stone that cleaves a rushing river. This one note, “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth,” disturbs the city like a bell set clanging by an earthquake. “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.” It is a perfectly simple introduction. Only Jesus hears the voice of God groaning low, like a tree bent before a storm. “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.” It is a perfectly simple farewell. There is no Word but this Word, made flesh, mute and riding on a donkey.

It has been a long journey. There is no royal trumpet. And there is no turning back.