

John Sampson
“Learning to Trust”
Text: Mark 11:1 - 11
Preached at KVCC
March 25, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer.

Today it seems as if the main character of our story finally takes center stage.

He has been spoken about since the beginning of our journey so many weeks ago. On a cold Wednesday evening back in February a small group of us gathered right here in this space to begin our journey of Lent by singing songs, sharing stories, and by marking ourselves with ashes to signify our mortality, and our desire for repentance – a repentance from the ways we hurt ourselves, the

ways we hurt each other, and the ways we reject God's invitation to all of us to live more compassionately, and more lovingly.

On that night we began a journey with Jesus as he, and his friends and disciples, traveled to Jerusalem, and to the foot of the cross.

And then, for some of us, it may have felt like Jesus left the stage, and left the building. At the moment when we might have assumed our story would have focused directly on the last moments of Jesus and his mission he seemed to disappear. Sure we would talk about Jesus and his final journey. Sure we would mention his message. But the stories we shared each Sunday were not about Jesus, or his parables, or his increasingly tense interactions with the religious authorities of his day.

The stories that were shared in this community were far older.

They were stories that Jesus would have heard when he was

growing up. They were stories that would have shaped his understanding about God, and her work in this world.

I shared these stories with you because I wanted us to be able to recognize that Jesus is actually not the main character of our story. The main character is God. And the stories we reflected upon centered on how God interacts not with one human, but with humanity – across time, and space.

I chose the stories we heard because I wanted us, as a community, to recognize that Jesus, and what happens to him during his last days, and beyond, is not the exception. It is simply another iteration of a Divine logic that has been witnessed to by all of God's people, regardless of the specifics of their lives.

Think of that first story we heard. It was the story of God making a covenant with Noah, and with all humanity, that she would never

destroy the world again. It was a story about God creating an unbreakable bond with people just like us, right after the most unspeakable horror had occurred. But this story told us that death and destruction are not the end. Something comes after them, and it is a promise so beautiful that only a rainbow can capture its shimmering grace.

Our next story was a story about an old couple who never had children, in a time when having children meant everything. Here again God enters the scene and makes another promise - this time to Abram and his wife Sarai telling them that although they are in their nineties they will have a son, and their descendants will be as numerous as the stars. After the heartache and doubt of a life without children, God makes a promise of a new and unimagined family. It is a covenant that comes true in the birth of Isaac.

Then we heard the story of the Israelites being peevish and ungrateful after having been liberated from slavery, and being fed with a miraculous food that came from heaven each morning. In response to their ingratitude God sent a plague of serpents that bit and killed many of the people. But they repented, and so did God. The Israelites raised a symbol of the serpents, and as long as they meditated on that image they were inoculated from the venom. Again God showed a people, and us, that death is not the final word in the story of humanity.

And finally, last week, we heard the prophecy of Jeremiah proclaiming that in days yet to come God would write her law on our hearts and that we would no longer live ungratefully in our own brokenness, but that we would know how to live into God's invitation to new life according to our deepest being.

Over this journey of Lent, from the center of the stage, our main actor, God herself, has been telling us in different scenes, and with a variety of supporting cast members, about her unbreakable love for us, about how this love even overcomes our own brokenness and our unwillingness to create a world where all can live in equality, and with blessing. That this love even overcomes death and sterility. That this love surpasses the boundaries that we think rule our lives.

Each one of these stories, each one of these scenes, is shared by our spiritual ancestors so that we may come to know something about God, and how they understood the Divine to work in the world.

These stories, strung together like pearls on a thread, slowly and surely make out for us an image of the Imageless, of the God that we can find so difficult to see directly in our own lives.

And now, being able to see God a little more clearly, to understand a little more deeply how the Author of Love works in our world, we come to stand with Jesus before Jerusalem. But it is important to realize God never leaves the stage, and she continues to be the main character of our story, even as the actions of today, and this week, focus more directly on Jesus, and those around him. And all that we have learned about God up to this point, about her unbreakable promises, her commitment to life, and her forgiveness for all of our failings, will imbue what happens in Jerusalem over these next days with a sacredness, even as the most horrible events unfold before us.

We have been prepared over the last weeks for what lays ahead. But do we trust what we have learned? Do we have the courage to step forward into the final days of Jesus' life and ministry? Can we follow this story into the depths of our own hearts, and see that what happens in Jerusalem, although set "once upon a time," reveals

a shocking truth about our own lives, and our own loves, and our own commitments?

This morning I find that I can relate to Jesus standing on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem. Maybe you can too. According to the gospel of Mark, this is the first and only time Jesus has been to the religious, and political center of the Jewish people. He stands there and sees for the very first time the Temple, the seat of God's presence on earth, a place of supreme holiness, which he has only heard about since his youth. But he also knows that Jerusalem will be the site of his own personal desecration. The place where he has been telling his disciples that he will be handed over, and executed. For Jesus at that moment, Jerusalem may appear to be the end of his life, and the end of his ministry.

I said I could relate to Jesus as he overlooks Jerusalem because it is, for him, a moment of decision. Jesus looks out from the Mount of

Olives, and I believe he understands that it is his final chance to avoid the dark path laying out before him. It is his last chance to cut and run, and possibly embrace a more normal life where he could have a wife and children of his own. Where he could live out his life as a carpenter, just like his stepfather Joseph did.

For us, this morning is also a moment of decision. It is the moment when we can either opt out of where the story of Jesus' last days is about to take us, or we can surrender and allow ourselves to fall into an unfathomable darkness - a darkness that lives in our hearts, and in our world – a darkness that we can so often be complicit with.

Standing there on the Mount of Olives, Jesus turns to us, just like he did on that morning so many weeks ago when he invited us to follow him, and become his disciples. He again comes in close, creating an intimate space between his body, and our bodies, and he looks right into our eyes. He doesn't say anything about being born of a virgin,

or anything about being the Son of God. Instead he simply asks us again, will you follow me?

And without waiting for our response Jesus steps off the summit of the Mount of Olives, and begins to descend into his future.

I think it is such a deep and challenging and provocative aspect of our story that when the crowds meet Jesus, and lay down the branches at his feet, and proclaim he is the one sent in the name of the Lord, it is not as Jesus ascends up a mountain, up into glory, up on to the throne of David, but only when he has descended, only when he has come off the mountain top, only when he has accepted his own death.

To follow Jesus, to live into his message of the poor and the mourning and the weak being the blessed, to experience our own vulnerability, and our own descent into weakness is the moment

when our tradition tells us that we will be recognized as the ones coming in the name of the Lord. It is not when we hold to the mountain top experience of our own success, and wealth, and name. But only when we give all of these things up will we have truly followed Jesus to Jerusalem, will we have truly learned the fullness of what it means to be a disciple.

So come, will you follow Jesus one last time?

Will you follow him as he makes his way down from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem?

Will you also be hailed by the crowds as one who comes in the name of the Lord?

Will you join him and come through the gates into the Holy City?

Will you accept his invitation to a table in an upstairs room and share bread and wine one last time with our teacher?

Will you let him wash your feet?

And will you, like all of the rest of us, abandon him and let him be arrested, and falsely charged?

Will you, like Peter, deny him?

And after a time, will you even come to see him broken and hung on a cross as a warning that no one should dare follow his message and teaching of love for all humanity?

Will you follow him this last time?

But as we ask ourselves these questions, these questions that may overthrow our own sense of ourselves, look up. Look to center stage and see God standing right there in the middle of all the action.

She hasn't abandoned Jesus. She hasn't abandoned us. She will be with us through it all. That is her promise to us. It has always been her promise to us, no matter what comes.

But have we learned to trust her?

Amen.