

Walking the Green Mile, Mk 11; Phil 2
Pastor Judy Bangsund
Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

Perhaps you have seen the Stephen King movie called *The Green Mile*, released some 15 years ago and starring Tom Hanks. It received four Academy Award nominations and became the most popular of King's novels ever to hit the big screen.

I'll never forget it. You may remember that the "Green Mile" referred to the green floor tiling on death row at a Louisiana prison during the Great Depression. This tiling led to the electric chair and was a concrete reminder of the walk all condemned prisoners would take to their death. No matter what else filled their days, the Green Mile was an ever-present reminder of their ultimate destination.

Jesus walked a similar Green Mile as he entered Jerusalem on the day we now call Palm Sunday. The crowd did not understand that his triumphant entry was the beginning of his Green Mile journey, a journey that took him five more days to complete. But Jesus knew. He knew that once he entered Jerusalem, his path would take him to a cross, to his execution. And he never let anything distract him from that reality.

Let's take a look. Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of loud "Hosannas" while riding on the back of a donkey – in fulfillment of the prophecy we read earlier. What becomes very clear to the alert reader is that while the crowd did not know what was going on, Jesus did. He deliberately chose a humble mode of transportation, as a servant -- for that was his mission. But he rode with the dignity of a king, for that is who he is. The crowd seemed to ignore the servant part and grabbed onto the king part, probably remembering the prophecies. They remembered that God had promised that a descendant of David would inherit the throne, and this is why they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" But they hoped Jesus would be a political king: the king of the Jews. They hoped he would lead a military coup, overthrowing the hated Romans, and restoring Israel as a sovereign nation. This is what they wanted, so they ignored his servant-entrance, choosing only to see Jesus as king.

But Jesus saw more. He also remembered the prophecies and deliberately chose a donkey for his entry into Jerusalem. He remembered, not only the words, "king" and "victorious," but also the words, "humble and lowly" and "peace." His kingdom would not be confined to the boundaries of Israel alone, but would extend from sea to sea. His was not meant to be a political or military move at all, but rather a move that would send him to the cross – and ironically, put into place events that would eventually make him King of all peoples.

Jesus was on a mission sent by the Father. It meant he had to give up his glory (as the son of God) to take the humble role of a servant. Perhaps you remember another movie called, *The Mask of Zorro*, starring Anthony Hopkins as the aging hero. In this movie, Zorro is older and bent on taking revenge on an enemy from his youth. In order to keep his identity hidden from this man while carrying out his plans, he takes on the character of a humble servant. Remember that? I'll never forget the scene where he "becomes" the servant. Not only is he dressed like one, he *becomes* one. His posture is a little more stooped, his gaze drops to the ground, his voice

becomes quiet and submissive. No one really notices him because he has faded into the woodwork -- just another slave. Just another servant whose sole concern is to obey his master's wishes.

In a similar way, Jesus *became* a servant. He didn't just dress up in peasant clothing and ride a donkey for dramatic effect; he *became* humble and lowly. His mission was to fulfill his Father's wishes, and Jesus was completely obedient to him – even though he could have chosen otherwise. In the garden, just a few days later, he would beg the Father to allow this cup to pass from him – asking for a reprieve from impending torture and a painful death. Scripture tells us Jesus sweat drops of blood as he prayed that night. But he finished by saying: “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” Jesus was obedient to the Father's wishes, regardless of his own suffering. That's what a servant does.

Jesus walked the Green Mile in obedience to his Father, in order to fulfill his mission. In making that journey, Jesus was also patient. He didn't rush to the cross, in a mad desire to get it over with. Like the donkey he rode, he plodded along, step by step, patient with the process. He let each moment play itself out and invested himself in it. Nothing escaped his attention; no detail was too small but he took notice. On Thursday, Jesus *took time* to share his last supper with his disciples – a special meal: the Passover. It was, and still is, the most important meal on the Jewish calendar. They take the time to remember how God saved his people from slavery, when Moses and his people left Egypt. They remember the night their first-born children were saved when the blood of a perfect and innocent lamb was painted on their doorposts. Jesus took time – that night – to wash his disciples' feet, teaching them true servant-hood. He spoke of betrayal and friendship and love. Then on Friday, as he walked through Jerusalem, already weakened by a night of torture, Jesus stopped to speak to the women who followed him, now no longer waving palm branches but weeping at his suffering. Later that day, on the cross, he used precious breath to speak lovingly to his mother and to his disciple, John; he gave peace of mind to a thief; and he forgave those who crucified him. Jesus was patient, using the time – investing in each moment -- to *be* who he is: the Servant of God, the Savior of all.

Jesus walked the Green Mile to his death, beginning at the gates of Jerusalem as he entered to shouts of *hosanna* and waving palms. His journey ended with his execution on the cross, five days later. As an obedient servant, he accomplished the mission of all time, God's plan of salvation for the world. And now we, too, have a Green Mile to walk.

Jesus' Green Mile was unique. As the Savior of the world, he accomplished the mission of salvation on our behalf. For you and me, it's a little different. For us, that mile begins at birth and ends at the grave. For you see, unlike Jesus, you and I are sinners. As sinners, we are condemned; we live on death row. Everyone who ever walked this earth shares the same destiny: the grave – and potentially, eternal death (for that is our sentence).

The Green Mile Jesus walked has direct impact on yours and mine. Because he, the perfect Lamb of God, shed his blood on the cross, it means that the Green Mile that we walk ends in the grave, but not necessarily in condemnation. That's what Jesus took on himself as he died, so that you and I would be pardoned. Our sentence was commuted from eternal death to eternal life. That's the good news of the cross.

When we become followers of Jesus, we each take up our own cross. For us, that signifies a death to self. It means taking on the very mindset of Jesus, who did not seek the glory that was rightfully his, but rather the life of a servant. We too, are called to set aside any self-glory – even if we feel it’s rightfully deserved. (No bumping of chests; no prancing before the camera.) Rather, we are to dress in the garments of servant-hood, putting on the clothing of obedience, patience and humility. This becomes possible for us because in Christ, a greater life awaits us, a more fulfilling one, one that will last eternally. That gives us the opportunity of living a very different kind of life here and now.

What does that look like? Well, it means a life of obedience. It means first deciding who is master in your life and then obeying that person. Ken Galbraith, economist and advisor to presidents, tells the story of his loyal housekeeper, Emily. It had been a tiring day, and Galbraith asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while he took a nap. Shortly thereafter the phone rang. It was the White House. Emily picked up the phone and heard an authoritative voice. “Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson.” “He is sleeping, Mr. President. I have orders not to disturb him.” “Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him.” “With all due respect, Mr. President; I can’t do that. I work for him, not for you.” And she politely ended the call. Galbraith continued his story: “Later, when I called the President back, he could scarcely control his pleasure. ‘Tell that woman I want her here in the White House.’” Emily knew how to be obedient to her boss; it’s a rare and valued quality. She knew whom she served and was completely obedient to him.

A servant’s life means loyal obedience. It also means humility. An admirer once asked Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, what was the hardest instrument to play. He replied without hesitation: “Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin – with as much enthusiasm – now that’s a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.” It’s hard to take up second position! Most of us will push ourselves forward, given the opportunity; we want the spotlight, the adulation. But as followers of Jesus, you are called to play second fiddle. It’s a humble position. It’s also a position to which God gives highest praise.

And, finally, a servant’s life is marked by patience. Now, if you are like me, this is really hard to do. I’m one of those people who wants to make things happen *now*, without allowing the necessary time for preparation. I want to get to the finish line without taking the time to run the course. But think of all Jesus accomplished in his life on the way to the cross. The people he met, the comments he made, the details that his followers remembered and later wrote down. No person was too small or unimportant for Jesus. He gave each one his time and attention and left them changed, ready to turn around and pay it forward. If you are his follower, take time to notice who is around you, what is going on, and invest yourself in the moment – patiently. Like Jesus did.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday with palms and hosannas. And it’s right that we do this today, because Jesus *is* our king. He is the Son of David, and we (who live on this side of the cross) know him to be the promised Messiah, the one bringing peace and a government of justice and mercy that will last forever. We know Jesus is the Son of God, and today we rightfully sing *Hosanna* with heart, soul and voice.

But it doesn't stop there. We are now beginning Holy Week – the most important week on the Christian calendar. As Jesus' followers, you and I are called to walk the Green Mile with him. You cannot celebrate today with palms and hosannas, and then move directly to Easter and the empty tomb. You need to go all the way to the cross, participating in Jesus' Green Mile. If you are already a follower, it's important to remember *all* of it; so that, unlike the original Palm Sunday crowd, you don't get sidetracked by your own hopes and dreams. If you are not yet a follower, this is your opportunity to find out more: why Jesus went to the cross and what that means for you. It stands at the heart of all we believe. So I entreat you to set aside the time it takes, to participate in Thursday and Friday worship. The Resurrection only makes sense in light of the Crucifixion. It's a critical part of your Green Mile.

Someday Jesus will come again, but this time, he will come in all his glory: as King of Kings, the victorious Son of God. On that day there will not just be a few hands waving palms, but *every* knee shall bow and *every* tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Some will whisper it in remorse. His followers will shout it in joyous celebration. And it will be so because Jesus walked that Green Mile. For you. (Prayer)