**6th Sunday in Lent April 13, 2014**

**Longing for Leadership**

**Matthew 21:1-11 Matthew 26:36-56**

*21:1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:*

*5 “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,*

*“Hosanna[b] to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

*26:36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”*

*39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” 40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. 41 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

*42 He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” 43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. 44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*

*45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”*

*47 While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.” 49 Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him.*

*50 Jesus replied, “Do what you came for, friend.” Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. 51 With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.*

*52 “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”*

*55 In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. 56 But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.*

When we reach this point in our observance of Lent we have a big slice of Jesus’ story to deal with. Matthew’s account begins in chapter 21, where we began this service a short while ago, as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. He rode into the city on a donkey and was hailed by the crowd: “The whole city was stirred,” says Matthew.

Jesus made his way to the Temple where he taught at considerable length during the week. He returned to Bethany in the evenings, presumably to spend the night with his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

The plot against Jesus takes its final shape about mid-week, Judas agrees to betray him and strikes his bargain with the priests. The disciples prepare the Passover meal in the Upper Room and after the supper they proceed to the Garden. There Jesus is arrested, questioned first by the Jewish authorities, then by the Romans. Then comes crucifixion, death and burial followed by Jesus’ resurrection and his appearance to his followers.

It’s quite a story, exciting, filled with suspense and mystery. Stand back and look at what happened here: as they approached Jerusalem there was Jesus—the leader, the focus of this movement. He had a group of twelve who followed him more closely, and then many others who were more distant followers. A loose confederation of persons, all of them wanting and expecting different things from Jesus and none of them expecting what was really about to happen.

As the week passed some of those followers fell away—out of fear, our of disappointment, through betrayal or denial—by Easter there remained only a small group shivering behind closed doors for fear of their enemies. The story does not end, though, until that timid group is forged into a mighty force that takes the good news of the resurrection throughout the world, and still, 2,000 years later, that mighty force is still at work.

How did he do that? How did Jesus accomplish so great a feat in so short a time. He spent perhaps as long as three years with his disciples, but as they approached Jerusalem that last time, they still did not under-stand, and after his resurrection they still weren’t sure they understood or believed until Pentecost came 50 days later. How did he take such a motley crew of followers and transform them from fishermen and tax collectors to disciples and then apostles? What a leader he must have been—what an engaging leader he is, even yet.

When I stand back from this story and look at it, that is the thing that impresses me more and more—the incredibly wise and disciplined, motivating and forward-looking leader Jesus was. Most telling is the fact that his work continued and grew even after he departed. Even in the midst of this Holy Week, even when he was overpowered by his enemies, he was still in the lead. Even as death approached, he still maintained himself as the unmistakable leader.

It seems to me that we are in the market for just such leadership today: courageous, strong, insightful, sensitive and wise. Unfortunately, that kind of leadership is not what we want and not what we’re looking for. We’re after something else: we want a winner, and we want leaders who are winners.

Winners are those who are number one, who come out on top, whether in an election or in a game. Winners have impeccable records, win Academy Awards and are recognized on the streets. Winners are charismatic and rich; they have influential friends and contacts all over the world. Their beauty is celebrated on the news and their pride is emulated by young admirers. What is your image of a winner, of someone who is successful, a person you want your kids to be like.

So here we are at Palm Sunday and we remember, we celebrate, this day of days when Jesus showed that he was a winner…right? No, not right. He was not a winner then. Palm Sunday was not as much a day of triumph, as it was a moment of truth. But a winner?....not according to the kinds of leaders we look for and vote for and admire.

Look at the story closely. The Bible I use has a heading over the story: “Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem,” but those headings are not part of the text and not always helpful. Here we have an unemployed peasant carpenter riding on a borrowed animal up a narrow dirty street where an enthusiastic cluster of people are shouting and clearing his way with palm branches. And when he entered the city, was he met with recognition and acclaim? No, the people asked, “Who is this guy?” Then the crowd had to tell them what his name was. “The whole city was stirred,” Matthew says….but they were not in turmoil because they were anxious to come and greet Jesus….they were aroused because they didn’t know what was going on and who this guy was.

Then, in a matter of just a few days, he was hounded, betrayed, arrested and murdered. In the garden he descended into the depths of grief and disappointment, incredulous that things and deteriorated so rapidly from curiosity, respect and acclaim to mortal danger.

No, not even on Palm Sunday. Jesus was not a winner, not like we want a winner. The Kingdom of God does not belong to spit and polish, to brass and braids, to preening and strutting and oversized egos. It’s not about Academy Awards and power politics and auditoriums filled with admirers. It belongs to the meek and the lowly. It belongs to one so knowledgeable and sensitive that as he looked into the soul of Jerusalem he wept. You know what happens to people who weep publicly, don’t you…well, they don’t win elections. If you want to understand the kind of leader Jesus was, you have to look at his teachings: “Blessed are the poor in spirit…blessed are the pure in heart,….blessed are the peacemakers…..blessed are the hungry.”

Jesus’ introduction to the Holy City was not from a reviewing stand. He was not wearing a neatly pressed uniform with five stars glittering from his shoulders. There was no endless parade of centurions marching by in smart formation. This was the Prince of Peace who had loved “all sorts and conditions” of people: the faithless and the slovenly, the diseased and the criminal; people who ate too much, drank too much, played too hard and married too often. He said, “Love God with all your energies and your neighbor as yourself.” “Love your enemies.” “Go a second mile.” “Turn the other cheek.” Absurd teachings….not the kinds of things a winner does or says….not the kind of things we want our leaders saying and doing.

Albert Schweitzer, the great doctor of Lambrene, made one trip to the United States in his life. It was the summer of 1949 when he and Mrs. Schweitzer arrived in New York. They traveled mostly by train as they visited the universities and churches of North America where Dr. Schweitzer played organs and taught classes. Upon arriving in Chicago, there was a reviewing stand at the train station, populated by the politicians, clergy and academics of the city, along with a large band. After many speeches, the mayor approached the microphone to present Dr. Schweitzer with the key to the city. When they looked for him, he was not there. Had he fallen down or moved to the other side of the stage. It only took a few moments of frantic looking for someone to spot him down on the train platform helping and elderly woman lift her heavy suitcase from the train platform onto the train she was trying to board. Is that not what we see in Jesus as well?....a leader who is generous and compassionate, self sacrificing and humble…certainly not the kind of leader we mostly see who is concerned with self preservation and self image.

I invite you to look at a leader among leaders today, and to consider the ways that you are shaping your life and the lives of your children. Consider your heroes, your winners, but then allow this one Jesus to inform your values. Jesus of Nazareth is a winner….he always was…but we have, to a large degree, lost the ability to recognize his kind of leadership and to follow in his way. We are so focused on identifying winners and being a winner ourselves that we overlook the sensitive forcefulness, he unconditional love, the self sacrifice that are the marks of the one whose kingdom will not end. Amen.