

## “Faith to Go Ahead”

Matthew 21:1-11 & Isaiah 35:1-10

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**Matthew 21:1-11 NRSV** “When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.””

The prophet Isaiah proclaims, **Isaiah 35:1-10 NLT** “Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days. The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon. There the Lord will display God’s glory, the splendor of our God. With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. God is coming to save you.” And when God comes, God will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived. And a great road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named the Highway of Holiness. Evil-minded people will never travel on it. It will be only for those who walk in God’s ways; fools will never walk there. Lions will not lurk along its course, nor any other ferocious beasts. There will be no other dangers. Only the redeemed will walk on it. Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness.”

Spencer, Abigail and I enjoyed backpacking in Glacier National Park. The views were awe inspiring. The scenery made us feel like we were soaring. Majestic mountains, thundering rivers, tree-lined, singing valleys, high mountain moon-like landscape that led into a dark tunnel. Emerging from the tunnel was like walking into a beautiful nature photo. The tunnel framed the landscape, with each step more was revealed until we emerged into the warm sunlight where the spectacular wonder of it all permeated us. Each step on the path revealed a unique experience. Some steps were a mix of excitement and caution like the encounter with the grizzly bear family. Some steps were arduous, sweat producing, heart pounding, breathe stealing, struggles of endurance. Some steps required dexterity as the path narrowly hugged the cliff. Some steps were grueling as we battled extreme winds, so strong, that I need

to hold onto Abigail and huddle together during the gusts. Some steps were funny, like Abigail trying to get water from a lake with large waves or Spencer protecting our food from the Columbian ground squirrels that circled our camp probing for an opportunity to steal food.

The last day we came to a crossroad. To the left and down led to showers, a restaurant and our vehicle. To the right and up led to a glacier and a lake with icebergs. We were ahead of schedule. We could get water from the lake. We had enough food for brunch and the hike down as we planned, but would run out of food if we added the hike to the lake. We decided to hike up to the lake. It is one of the most talked about parts of our trip. Walking on a glacier was remarkable. The views extraordinary. Abigail decided to cool her feet in the lake. Unexpectedly she slid down the slippery rock. The water immediately took her breath away. I quickly pulled her out with a trekking pole. My hiking boot sole blew out, so I finished the hike in my camp sandals. The trail out was made even longer, because we were detoured around some grizzly bears. At dusk we arrived at the restaurant where they seated us in the corner, possible due to our grimy, smelling condition. We ordered appetizers, two large pizzas, and an entire berry pie. The waiter said we could never eat it all, but we enjoyed every bite.

Holy week is an excellent time to pause and consider the “crossroads” in your life, those times when you have a decision to make. Paths, are places of transition. Times to pray for guidance and faith to put one foot in front of the other in walking the spiritual path of your life.

Each of us has walked a unique path to today from Advent when God called us to “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” It’s one of those verses that has always hit me right in the spine. On the one hand, I think, Wow, what an amazing image, how amazing that God would call a human being to be a part of the divine story. And at the same time I think, What on earth? Prepare the way... of the Lord? How are we supposed to prepare the way of the Lord? Aren’t we all supposed to follow Jesus, not precede him? Given the choice I would much rather have Jesus stepping out in front of me, leading the safari, not sending me ahead to prepare the way, to hack away at the vegetation with my little machete.

I have always been a bit partial to the “footprints” poem aspect of God in which Jesus carries us during the hard times. That works splendidly for me. I am mixed about the twenty-third Psalm 23. I savor God as my shepherd filling me with goodness, grace and unfailing love, giving me all I truly need, leading me beside still waters, restoring my soul, preparing me a feast, assuring me of my eternal home and resting in the green meadows of life.

The rest of the twenty-third psalm is challenging us, urging us onward, inspiring us to go ahead, to take the next step. The promised feast is with enemies meaning we must forgive and let go. There are valleys in our life with joint pounding, grinding, descents littered with injuries. We journey through valley floors dark, unfamiliar, with the shadow of death. We encounter that which diminishes life, grief, suffering, pain, sorrow, sadness, chaos, tragedy, confusion, disease, broken relationships, death. Then we must climb out of the valley, groaning, sweating, staggering with every step, up, up, up, what seems like an endless ever steeper grade. Dr. Seuss wrote, “When you are in a slump. You are not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done.” Sometimes un-slumping yourself is only possible by the transforming, uplifting, resurrecting grace of God.

Why do we need to be lead through the valleys? Why can’t we stay enjoying the mountaintop meadows with the refreshing stream? The sheep every so often need to move to a new meadow or they will run out of food and kill the grass. Do we need to go through the valleys to learn about ourselves, God and the power of God’s resurrecting grace? Do our valley journeys enable us to grow in love, joy and gratitude?

Jesus carrying me, leading me that sounds good. But whenever I hear, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” I am reminded that sometimes Jesus doesn’t just lead us, or carry us. Sometimes Jesus sends us ahead, calling us to journey into new places and to do unexpected things.

Matthew 21 is just the kind of story where that happens. It’s kind of easy to miss that—with the donkey and the colt and the cloaks and the hoopla and the palm branches and the shouts of Hosanna and the turmoil in the streets of Jerusalem. This is Jesus’ parade, of course, and he is the center of it all—the recipient of all that attention and pomp, the king, the prophet Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee.

Notice the disciples. Jesus sends them to a nearby village to retrieve a donkey and a colt. But not to a village they’ve already been, not to a village where Jesus had just visited, and the memory of him is fresh in their minds. No, Jesus says, Go into the village ahead of you. Go to that place you haven’t been, go to that place I haven’t taken you yet, go to that place that’s still up the road a ways. There will be a donkey and colt there, and if anyone says anything just tell them, ‘The Lord needs them.’

Now, we know that the disciples did what they were told; they let Jesus send them on ahead with these very cryptic instructions. But I have to wonder if they protested a little bit. They didn’t know what they would encounter there. Were there dangers on the road? We are close to Jerusalem—hostilities are starting to build and it won’t be long before they boil over. It’s not hard to imagine them putting up a bit of a fight... Do we have to go to that village up ahead? Why don’t we go back to that village we just left? They know us there. I think I saw a donkey and a colt at old Eli’s house. We don’t know what we’ll find in this village up ahead. It’s unknown territory. Maybe they’re hostile to us. Or perhaps... Y’know what, Jesus? Why don’t you go on ahead and we’ll tag along behind. You will make a much more convincing argument than us anyway. Y’know, we dropped our fishing nets in order to follow you not to go ahead of you.

You see, it takes faith to follow Jesus. And we are called to do that. But it takes blind faith to go ahead of Jesus into the unknown. It takes crazy faith to walk down a road your feet have never walked before. It takes intrepid faith to look back over your shoulder and see Jesus, smiling and saying, “Yes, go on. I’ll be right here when you get back.”

The humor website *The Onion* has a fake new piece: 10 Million Killed Annually By Stepping Out Of Comfort Zones: WASHINGTON—A new report published this week by the Department of Health and Human Services revealed that more than 10 million Americans are violently killed each year while attempting to break away from their regular everyday routines and try something new. "We found that getting out of your comfort zone and facing your fears resulted in premature death nearly 78 percent of the time," Researcher Madeline Hersh said. "People always ask themselves, 'What's the worst that can happen?' Well, according to our research, anything from being bitten by a poisonous snake to dying in a hot-air balloon crash can happen." The report found that the safest individuals were those who surrendered to the soul-crushing monotony of habit and then convinced themselves that they had things pretty good."

Sometimes risk comes from something as ordinary as arranging transportation by donkey. But even these small acts of risk leave us open, vulnerable, available to something new. Yes, it takes faith to follow Jesus. But it takes an irrepressible faith to go ahead into risky territory.

The crowds making their way into Jerusalem knew this. Look at the text. Of course, some followed Jesus, shouting their Hosannas and their Blesseds. But it’s not the crowd in Jesus’ rear-view mirror, following at a comfortable distance, that gives Palm Sunday its name. It was the crowd that went ahead of him. The crowd that cut palm branches and put them on the road, that spread its cloaks on the road—the crowd that prepared the way of the Lord. You can’t do that when you’re following. You’ve got to be out ahead.

These crowds ahead of Jesus—they just couldn't help themselves. They couldn't help bursting into Jerusalem, that busy and bustling city, and sending the city into a messy uproar. "He's coming! He's coming! Jesus, the prophet has arrived. Blessed is the one who comes."

Are there places in our lives in which we are obediently following Jesus? Thank God for that obedience. But could it be that maybe, just maybe, Jesus has stopped leading for a moment and is just standing with you where you are, and maybe he's just pointing. Just pointing, to that village up the road, the village where something risky resides. Who knows what you'll find there? Who knows what we will find there?

Abigail and Lucita enjoying pole vaulting for the North High Polars. You can watch others pole vault. Your coach can teach you all the mechanics. However, if you are ever going to vault, you need to go ahead. You need to grip your pole, run, plant, jump, twist and soar through the air. No one else can do it for you. Every time you want to go higher. You must go ahead.

Jesus has modeled how to live joyful, abundant, fully alive life. Jesus has modeled grace, peace, compassion and extravagant love. Jesus has modeled resurrection from every form of death. Jesus has taught all of this as well. The Holy Spirit is coaching us. Jesus is encouraging us to go ahead, onward. We are prompted to go ahead, onward, through valleys to our mountain meadows.

Dating back to the Middle Ages spiritual directors have greeted and sent people with one word, "Onward". Keep going, onward, go farther, onward, have faith to go ahead, onward. Just taking the next step propels you onward. We began this service with shouts of Hosanna. Perhaps onward is the way to conclude it, as the journey leads us into unexpected places. Amen