

Into the Landscape: The Road

*A sermon preached on Mark 11:1-11 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on March 25, 2018*

When I was a kid, my family-of-the-preacher lived in the parsonage in the thick of Main Street, just about a five minute walk down the street from our church. On one end of the populated part of Main Street were two of the small town's school's and the library. Right in the heart of Main Street was the county courthouse, squared by local shops and cafes and barbers and dance studios and banks. All of which made our spacious front yard an ideal viewing spot for many of our church friends to come and congregate for any of the town's parades, most of which followed that very route.

I remember the Christmas parades, where we'd bundle up and huddle together on blankets in my front yard, our hands filled with steaming mugs of hot chocolate, waiting impatiently for Santa who brought up the rear each year. I remember the spring jubilee parades, eagerly racing about the sidelines with my friends to catch candy and beads thrown to us by the city's civic leaders and businesses and local celebrities who rolled through the annual parade with ease. I remember the year my gymnastics studio joined the procession and I got to walk, my arms aching from waving furiously at the small and mighty crowds watching us, my hands sticky and sore from the asphalt upon which I tried to do far too many cartwheels along the course.

These parades, you see, joined with other street festivals, big wheel races, pinewood derbys, running and cycling events, all of which allowed 'we the people' to reimagine how we used the roads that cut through our city. The same road that held anger over car wrecks that stole lives and well-being

became the road that enabled delight to splash across the faces of children. The same road that grew quiet and still for funeral processions bustled with daily activity to move its people to schools and workplaces. The same road that segregated the white end of Main Street from the black end gave the illusion of holding its citizens together alongside one another in shared festivity. The same road that functioned practically to transport people from one place to the next became the space for fun and for sport, for civic engagement and for public demonstration. For it seems that no matter the road, we traveled it wondering what we might encounter.

In the same spirit of discovery, I wonder on this Palm Sunday about the crowds as the writer of Mark describes them, throngs of ‘many people’ who filled that road to Jerusalem. What had they been doing before making their way to the side of that street? Before completing their day’s back-breaking labor in the fields, had they paused to clip the branches they carried? Were the cloaks they shed and spread onto the packed dirt road their only protection from the chilly Palestinian nights? Were the kids delighting in the movement of the moment, dancing and running around on the sidelines? We’re told the crowds proclaimed ‘hosanna’, which in just a word, juxtaposed praise and deep need. “*Hosanna* – save us! *Hosanna* – help us now!” Did they hope he came like King David, the mighty and powerful ruler who secured their place in the order of things? Did they know who he was? There on the side of the road that day, did they have any idea what they wanted saving from?

I wonder about all the others who filled those Jerusalem streets that day, the religious gathering as was their custom for the festival of Passover,

the political watching nervously for any signs that their tight grip on power could be loosened. Did Pontius Pilate and his imperial soldiers have a sense that a revolution was underway, that the world as they knew it was about to shift in seismic proportion? Did they see the crowds with their cloaks and branches and think ‘insignificant parade’ or ‘planned political demonstration’?¹ Could they have fully realized the magnitude of the confrontation that would bring to a head expressions of power and strength and authority?

I wonder about those disciples he sent with explicit instructions to fetch a donkey. As he was detailing where to go, what to do, what to say, and how to manage the conflict that might arise, did they feel deflated that all these weeks of following Jesus led them to the lowly task of being assigned ‘donkey detail’ on such an important day?² Did they grumble under their breath as they wrangled that untamed animal, wishing they were back in the middle of the action instead of off the beaten path in a stable? Were they confounded about why he asked for such a transport – why not a horse, why not walk, why does this matter? Do you think in the far recesses of their memories from Sabbath School, they would recall the words of the prophet from Zechariah of the king coming to you, ‘triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey,’ and wonder if this moment was fulfillment centuries in the making?³

¹ Part of this interpretation stems from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan’s substantial work, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem*, p4.

² All credit for “donkey detail” and any other clever imagery in this paragraph either quoted from or inspired by Tom Long’s rich sermon on Mark 11:1-11 called “Donkey-Fetchers,” <https://www.religion-online.org/article/donkey-fetchers-mark-111-11/>

³ Zechariah 9:9-10

I wonder about Jesus, about the things that filled his mind as he walked and rode the road to Jerusalem. I wonder if he felt the weight of the legacy he claimed: legacy of the paths that Abraham trod to follow the Lord to the land promised from generation to generation, legacy of the roads that Moses traveled to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt, legacy of Wisdom who 'raises her voice at the crossroads where she takes her stand,'⁴ legacy of the way in the wilderness prepared for him by prophets from Isaiah to John the Baptist, the crooked roads made straight and the rough places plain. Did he remember the story of the Wise Men whose experience with the babe led them home by another way? Did his mind travel to all the beggars and blind men who sat in need of a miracle on the roadside? Did he smile as he recalled his story of the highways and byways where all were compelled to come in, the story of a roadside ditch where even the worst of enemies became friends, the story of the humble path that carried a prodigal home? Did the faces of his friends rise in his mind's eye, remembering their widening eyes as he said, "I am the Way"?

I wonder how he understood that final journey to and through Jerusalem. As he set his face towards the Holy City and 'a hill faraway,' could he already smell the scent of riotous anger seething through the crowds that would turn cheers to jeers in a matter of days? Could he already see the friends who slept through his hour of deliverance, the deniers and betrayers that hoped to sneak away unnoticed? Could he already hear the whistling hush into which he would beg a silent God to take this cup away from him, plead with the Father he felt had forsaken him? Could he already feel the

⁴ Proverbs 8:1-2

searing pain of thorns and nails? Could he know what would transpire in the darkness of a tomb?

I wonder about the roads of our communities, about the hunger for change that filled thoroughfares around the world yesterday as marchers took to the streets to call our leaders to a higher moral standard. I recall the story of Dr. King, who from the pulpit of the most influential church in the land, said: “On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.”⁵ Could the same spirit that has driven millions in our history to march for equality, march for peace, march for an end to violence, be the spirit that beckoned Jesus to march towards a death that gave us life? Could our church, a church that claims our street in our name, be for this city the hands and feet and voices who are ready to go to work on the Jericho Roads around our community?

I wonder all these things as I wander through this season into the landscapes of Lent. I wonder as I wander down paths that lead to dead ends, detours that lead me away from the way of Life, shortcuts that I think will squeeze in more tasks, more accomplishments, more productivity as I move throughout my days. I wonder as I wander in times of grief like a funeral procession, in hours of anger like a political demonstration, in days of despondence like traffic-filled commute, in moments of determination like the final mile of a road race, in times of childlike delight like a small-town

⁵ From Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon called “A Time to Break Silence,” preached at The Riverside Church on April 4, 1967.

parade. I wonder as I wander where this course will lead, which avenues I should take, where I should turn or deviate from the path I'm on. I wonder as I wander through this holiest of weeks if I have the courage follow Jesus through the cries of hosanna to his cries from the cross.

But in all the questions, in all the wonderings that fill my mind and the wanderings that move my feet, I trust that this road to the cross is one paved with blessing. This road to the cross is prepared for the demonstrators and the donkey-fetchers, the deniers and the betrayers, the delighted spectators and the angry mobs, the grieved and the grieving, those in power and those whom power abuses. This road to the cross welcomes children and youth, middle-agers and seniors, you and you and you and me to move from the sidelines into the street, linking arms together so that no matter the road, no matter the trial, no matter the march or the cause, we walk it together. We walk this road to the cross following the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life to the place where Life will overcome Death.

This road winds through the landscapes of our lives, each step along the way filled with sacred blessing. In the words of poet Jan Richardson,

This blessing can be heard coming from a long way off.

This blessing is making its steady way
up the road toward you.

This blessing blooms in the throats of women,
springs from the hearts of men,
tumbles out of the mouths of children.

This blessing is stitched into the seams of the cloaks that line the road,
etched into the branches that trace the path,
echoes in the breathing of the willing colt,
the click of the donkey's hoof against the stones.

Something is rising beneath this blessing.
Something will try to drown it out.
But this blessing cannot be turned back,
cannot be made to still its voice,
cannot cease to sing its praise
of the One who comes along the way it makes.⁶

Amen!

⁶ Jan Richardson, "Blessing of Palms," *Circle of Grace*, p123-124.