
DESIRING DESCENT

MARK 11:1-11

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2024
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We see a colt and cloaks and branches and hear the shouting of ‘Hosanna,’ but Palm Sunday is still a downer, though not quite like if your favorite March Madness basketball team lost. Nonetheless, it’s still madness. To say Palm Sunday is a downer says something about the way Jesus moves in the world and into the world. We hear that “they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives,” which means Jesus would cross over the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and then eventually descend on the town of Bethany. So one could say that his movement was downward, geographically, literally, and metaphorically. The Gospel of Mark makes *this* message clear—with its emphasis on the suffering of Jesus more than his resurrection—Jesus is going down.

I know the spreading of garments on a colt and the road alludes to a coronation custom (2 Kings 9:13). I know “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” is from Psalm 118, a royal psalm for an enthronement procession. Jesus *is* a king, but his coronation will happen on a cross. He descends as he’s enthroned. He’s going down into a baptism of death. And I always remember what biblical scholar John Levison writes in his book on the Holy Spirit—it is “not possible to explore the spirit of life without facing squarely the reality of death.” If you don’t go down, you won’t go up. Jesus descends upward.

As the hymn writer says, “Down at the cross where my Savior died, Down where for cleansing from sin I cried....” All week long during Holy Week, Jesus will be going further down. This isn’t just what he does, but who he is. You remember the Philippians hymn? “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” The Incarnation of God in Jesus is a descent. We sing it during the holiday season: “Love came down at Christmas.” Extra, extra, read all about it in the Duke Chronicle!—Palm Sunday is a downer.

And there’s nothing wrong with being down. Society often presents progress as going up, as if the goal is to ascend higher and higher. The church does the same as well so often, even in its music—“I’m going up a yonder to be with my Lord.” There’s nothing wrong with going up as long as we don’t despise going down, being lower, getting humble like a colt and riding on it. I say this because not only at the Incarnation did love come down but in the vision of the end in Revelation we hear that God’s home is among mortals. That means God comes down.

There is a descent when you follow Jesus. Like at a discotheque, we need to get down. But do we aspire and desire descent in the spiritual life? That’s the way of Christ. Not failing downward but flourishing in a decline. What is your spiritual trajectory? Is it one that reaches for the stars and the highest peaks of faith or is it one that engages the earth and the dirt, the colts and the animals of the world, the palm branches of nature, the vast daily human suffering and frailty and ashes of death, even our own?

I’m not trying to be a downer this morning (though some former students used to call me Dr. Death), but Palm Sunday surely is—a downer. It turns us upside down. Not only does King Jesus head down but when he’s brought the colt, he sits down on it, and cloaks are placed down on it and cloaks and branches are placed down on the road. Some church traditions were right: “It’s coming down, down, down, it’s coming down, when the glory of the Lord is coming down....”

Are you a downward disciple? Perhaps you already are without even recognizing it—in certain liturgical practices. You bow your head down in prayer. You bow down before the cross. This bowing may be of respect and

honor and worship, but it may also be a visible sign that we are laying our burdens down before Christ. And later this week, we will bow down again to wash each other's feet just like Jesus.

In the descent, the downward movement, we encounter Jesus. Even at his baptism, the Spirit of God descended like a dove on him. The Rev. Howard Thurman—deemed one of the top 12 preachers in America in 1953 by *Life* magazine and someone who preached here in 1979—was baptized at the age of 12 in 1913. During that ritual, he walked with the celebrants in a long line of baptismal candidates dressed in white while the deacons wore black for this special occasion. They marched through the streets of Daytona Beach, Florida, to the Halifax River, where he was dipped into the water. This processional line was led by a woman known as old lady Wright as she sang in a loud voice, “Let’s go down to Jordan, Hallelujah!”

When we go down in the sacrament of baptism, we meet God. There’s a sacramentality of descent, meaning we encounter the presence of Christ even when we’re down. The Psalms are so good at reminding us of this. “If I ascend into heaven, thou art there and if I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there.” “Yea though I walk through a valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me.” “Why are you downcast, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” When we are down, we are not alone but can find help and hope in the time of trouble. In our descent, in our decline, in our decay, you’ll find that you are met by a Christ on his way down to death. These days, one might say that things are looking down in the world—political polarizations, international wars and civil unrest, environmental decay—but even when things are looking down, know that’s when Jesus is up to something.

Some may be feeling down today and for some, maybe it’s every day. In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, educator Parker Palmer writes openly about his struggle with clinical depression at two different times when he was in his 40s (he’s in his 80s now). He says that he “spent endless months in the snake pit of the soul” and wrestled with the burden of life and exhaustion. He recognizes that depression comes in many forms and there are various reasons for it—genetic, biochemical, situational and so on. But he says that depression is “the ultimate state of disconnection.”

And it was a challenging journey for him as it is for so many. One day his therapist said this to him: “You seem to look upon depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Do you think you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to the ground on which it is safe to stand?” At first, to Parker, this conception of depression seemed “romantic” and even “insulting.” Yet he writes this: “something in me knew that down, down to the ground, was the direction of wholeness, thus allowing that image to begin its slow work of healing in me. I started to understand that I had been living an ungrounded life, living at an altitude that was inherently unsafe. The problem with living at high altitude is simple: when we slip, as we always do, we have a long, long way to fall, and the landing may well kill us. The grace of being pressed down to the ground is also simple: when we slip and fall, it is usually not fatal, and we can get back up.”

What he discovers is that a way to and of God is not up but down. Isn’t that what the Spiritual says? “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go....” When you go down, you will find freedom. You will discover liberation. If Christ didn’t go down, we wouldn’t be free ultimately, but still enslaved by the idea that only by going up, can we meet God. Holy Week teaches us otherwise. This is why Palm Sunday is a downer. Jesus said it himself in last week’s gospel reading in John: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Jesus shows us that you can descend and flourish. Don’t despise a decline or going down or being down in life, in your organization, or in your faith. I won’t. Because even though I’m up here, I know Jesus will be with me even when I sit down.