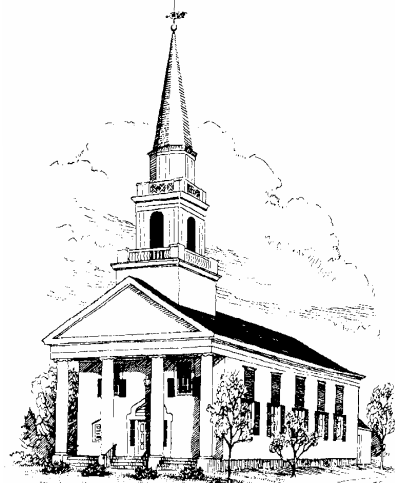


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 1, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Gateway Moments”

Scriptures:
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 19:28-40



Today is a day to consider gateway moments in our lives even as we glimpse a gateway moment in the life of Jesus. Can you think of some of the gateway moments in your life? Can you remember events or moments in your life which you now know were significant moments in time that changed the course of your life? Can you remember an event (or perhaps several) where you made a choice or a decision which changed your life forever—either for better or worse?

Perhaps it was the day you first left home, your first job, or your first apartment. Maybe it was your wedding day, or the arrival of your first child, or the day of your divorce. Maybe it was a choice made about your career or a switching of work settings. Perhaps it was the decision to retire or a choice to start something new. Perhaps for you it was the decision to stop doing something: to stop overeating, to stop drinking or smoking, to stop gambling or using drugs.

Perhaps you can recall a gateway moment as a day in your life when someone or something new walked into your life, or you completed a particular book or course work, or perhaps you had a powerful spiritual awakening or a call experience. Perhaps you remember a day when you recognized a special gift or talent or perhaps it was when you came to awareness of your special calling in life.

Sometimes gateway moments are also the death or dying of someone in your life. Gateway moments come in all shapes and sizes. Now I don't just mean the day you started eating oat bran to lower your cholesterol or the day you finally started an exercise program – although those might be life changing moments for some. I mean a moment or a time when something happened or you made a decision that you now know changed your life forever.

I imagine we each have memories of such important events or moments in our lives—gateway moments or turning point events, if you will. Each of us has such gateways in our lives through which we might choose or are forced or compelled to go which have had repercussions for us throughout the rest of our lives.

Clearly not all gateway moments are joyful or happy moments. Many such experiences are painful and even traumatic. Nonetheless, they are moments which represent a crossroad in our lives. We each have moments when we choose a path to go that changes everything. Even if we might have wished to, we could not avoid making a choice. We knew (maybe after the fact) that we would live with that choice forever.

Robert Frost captures just such a moment in his famous poem, “The Road Not Taken”:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Well, whether we took the road less traveled or the other road, either way those choices and those various roads we choose do make a difference and reflect who we are this day.

So here we are at Palm Sunday—a Gateway Moment for certain for Jesus. We remember that Jesus had been planning for a long time to go to Jerusalem. We remember that Jesus had grieved over Jerusalem in advance of his arrival. Last week we looked at Jesus just outside of Jerusalem with his friends at a home in Bethany. We were aware even then that Jesus knew that his time was nearly up. So on this day, he probably knew that his freedom and his ministry and even his life would eventually be taken away from him in this city in the days ahead.

We recall how Jesus instructs his disciples to go and fetch a colt and how he rode that colt into Jerusalem on that morning so long ago. We remember how the disciples spread their garments on the road in front of him and how the crowds of folks entering into Jerusalem for the Passover festivities shouted with joy and chants of enthusiasm: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” And they yelled: “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” In other renderings of the story, we remember how the crowd waved palm branches and shouted, “Hosanna!”

I imagine that most of us love a parade! We love a parade when there are marching bands and balloons and, perhaps, clowns and even funny hats. I saw evidence last Sunday after church how much this town loves a parade as the whole town seemed to gather and line up out here on the sidewalks and steps of every building for the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade!

We love the beat of the drums and the lively tunes of whatever band plays or whatever fife and drum corps company comes out to march! We love the smiles on children’s faces and the feeling of excitement and anticipation that permeates the crowd as folks await the start of things and what’s coming next!

On Palm Sunday, we sometimes catch a glimpse of that same parade feeling, that same sense of excitement about parades! Most of us love a parade! Yet, today's Palm Sunday parade also has another quality, doesn't it? This parade has for us a bittersweet quality about it.

We know that though Jesus enters the gates of Jerusalem on a colt, celebrated and hailed as a King, that the only crown he will wear will be a crown of thorns, and the only throne, a rough-hewn cross. We cannot help but remember how this parade ends. We cannot ever forget that this parade turns sour in less than a week's time. Jesus enters Jerusalem hailed as a king. Yet, in less than a week, he is crucified as a common criminal among thieves.

Today we remember that Gateway Moment in Jesus' life as he rides into Jerusalem. We watch as this king rides into the city for a strange sort of coronation. We watch as Jesus arrives amidst the accolades of friends and disciples. Yet, before the week is done, we know that Jesus will be rejected, that he will be denied repeatedly by his friends, and that he will be denounced by many who even this day greet him with all respect and hail him with genuine excitement and joy! We know that death lies just around the corner on this day.

It would be nicer if we could move right from the parade of Palm Sunday to the joy of Easter morning. It would be easier and gentler if we could move right from the joy-filled parade to the joy-filled resurrection.

But to do that would be to miss the incredibly difficult reality of all that Jesus had to go through in this holiest of weeks. To move from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without the rest of the story is to miss the whys and the wherefores of all that Jesus ultimately sacrificed for you and for me.

By faith we say, Jesus gave up his life for each of us. By faith we say, Jesus died on a cross, for the forgiveness of our sin. This week is all about how that happens. Don't miss it. Even if all you do this coming week is to sit and read the last two chapters of Luke's gospel—the entire Palm and Passion narrative—that would be enough to remind you of the whole story.

Today is both a Gateway into Holy Week and a Gateway Opportunity to deepen our faith. There is no doubt that this day was a Gateway Moment for Jesus. There is too much scriptural evidence that suggests that Jesus knew what was coming, that Jesus knew that he rode to his death as he rode into the city of Jerusalem on this day.

We can't say for sure but all signs seem to point to the reality that Jesus knew that he must ride through this cheering crowd and later drag himself and a heavy cross through a jeering crowd to his death before he could achieve all that God had in mind for him. We don't know for sure what Jesus was feeling on that day as he rode into the city on a colt. What was clearly not an accident is that he rode in on a colt. All four Gospel accounts agree on that point. By doing so, Jesus deliberately claimed he was the long awaited Messiah.

Jesus claims this Kingship in an unexpectedly meek and peaceful way—he arrives riding on a young colt and not on a war horse! He arrives not as a king of hate but a king of love! We know that not everyone was happy about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem that day. Not everyone liked this parade. Some folks were truly offended by the way Jesus was given the "royal treatment." Some demanded that Jesus quiet the crowd down; others rebuked the disciples. Not everyone understood what was happening that day. Others must have guessed all too well what possible troubles lay ahead.

Jesus responds to his critics with a delightful reflection, doesn't he? Jesus says that, even if the crowds were silent, the stones that make up the temple walls would shout out and proclaim his coming

instead! He knew that this Gateway Moment could neither be stopped nor hindered nor reversed. Jesus knew that, by entering the city of Jerusalem, God's history was forever being changed and that nothing would or could stop it now! Even if the crowds were silent, the stones would have cried out: the Messiah had arrived; God had made God's presence felt in the world!

Today is truly a Gateway Moment—another of God's Advent, God's coming into the world! This is a truth that cannot be silenced or stopped. At this Gateway to Holy Week, we find ourselves inexorably drawn into the rest of the story of the passion. Someone has said, "Holy Week is the time when we need to live ourselves deeply into the passion so that we may then live ourselves deeply into the resurrection."

Today is a gateway opportunity for each of us here—a gateway to Holy Week and a gateway into the future of this community of faith.

Even as we plod through the difficult events and painful moments of this Holy Week, let us remember that we are a Resurrection People! By faith we know that God's steadfast and enduring love brought Jesus through this week, through his death and into glory with God. By faith we know that, by doing all these things, Christ opened a gateway for each of us to salvation and eternal life.

Let us open our hearts this week! Let our faith be strengthened by these Gateway moments! Thanks be to God! Amen.