

The Reconnaissance Mission of Our Lord
Mark 11:1-11

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Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. Mk. 11:11

The violent insurrection at the U. S. Capitol on January 6 is still very much of the national conversation. Attention, at least early on in the investigation, showed interest in some suspicious tours of the Capitol that took place just prior to the day of the riot. Several analysts now wonder if those tours were reconnaissance missions conducted by the planners of the insurrection who wanted to study the building to better how to maneuver around in it and overtake it.

I do not know how to think about that. But I do believe we might be closer to a proper understanding of the events of Palm Sunday if we view those events not as a parade held for its own sake but as a reconnaissance mission of our Lord conducted in advance of the work he planned to do later in Holy Week.

The key text that suggests to me that Palm Sunday was a reconnaissance mission conducted by Jesus is Mark 11:11: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." That rendition of the day makes it sound to me as though Jesus didn't *do* anything on Palm Sunday other than look. He may not have been after the parade as such but rather discovery.

When we bring this matter into our own situation the primary issue for us today is not that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a reconnaissance mission long ago but that he enters our lives now. When he arrives among us now, he again looks around in reconnaissance. His searching eye takes us in. What does he see?

As we study this matter, let's not divert ourselves into passing judgment on what Jesus may or may not find in others. Let's be self-reflective and consider what the Lord's reconnaissance may find out about us.

Will the Lord find faith?

When I use the term faith here I am not thinking of a creedal statement or some kind of doctrinal content. I am thinking of faith in its basic sense as trust. Two New Testament stories can help get at the meaning of the word as I am using it now.

There was a woman who was sick. She had suffered from an illness for many, many years. She had spent all her money on the health care system, but she was not at all better off because of it. She grew worse. She heard that Jesus was going to be traveling quite near to her

one day, and she had heard about his healing power. She said to herself, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well” (Mk. 5:28). We have no idea what her doctrines were or how expansive her creedal statement was, but she trusted Jesus. The Lord recognized that trust as a faith he admired (Mk. 5:34).

By contrast, there was a father with a sick boy. It appears the boy had epilepsy, causing his severe seizures that frightened his parents tremendously. They, too, had heard about Jesus’ reputation as a healer, and so the father took the boy, hoping for a healing. Said he to the Lord, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us” (Mk. 9:22). Jesus, though he graciously and marvelously helped this family, heard a lack of trust in the father’s voice, and said, in effect, “What do you mean ‘If’?” He didn’t see the faith – the trust – he looked for in people.

We know that faith is something Jesus will look for when he comes. He himself said as much. He wondered aloud one day, using a name for himself he often used, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk. 18:8)

Will he find faith in you? What will the reconnaissance show? Are you living with trust in God or are you living with trust in everything but God?

Will the Lord find compassion?

Compassion was a chief characteristic of Jesus. There was a man – some of the gospels say he was a rich young man – who came up to Jesus one day with a question. He was rather arrogant in his assessment of himself, but he was innocent in his arrogance. We are not told Jesus smiled as he listened to him, but I believe he did. We are told Jesus looked at him and loved him; he had compassion toward him (Mk. 10:21).

Then there was that time Jesus was out in the countryside in some grassy hills. A crowd had come out to him, and the crowd was full of need. The crowd included people who were sick, people who were lame, people who were desperate – people hungry for help. Jesus, we are told, had compassion on them, for “they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk. 6:34).

Compassion was a chief characteristic of Jesus and he was always hoping to find or instill that compassion in his disciples. At the feeding of the 5000 the twelve came to him, knowing it was getting late in the day and that the people were going to need to eat soon. They told Jesus to send the crowd away to fend for themselves, to find something to eat; they weren’t a welfare agency, after all (Mk. 6:35-36). But Jesus told the disciples to give them something to eat, to show compassion (Mk. 6:37).

Likewise, when Jesus sent the disciples out two-by-two, he wanted them to teach because he cared about people’s mind; he wanted them to heal because he cared about their physical, mental, and emotional illness; he wanted them to help all who were desperate (Mk. 6:7-13).

Is compassion toward others something Jesus will find in you on his reconnaissance mission today? Are you living with compassion? Are you living with compassion that reaches beyond those whom you know, like, and consider “deserving”?

Will the Lord find the willingness to change?

Jesus knew he was bringing about difference. He saw the need for the new. He had a line in his teaching in which he called attention to the fact that now wise person puts new wine into an old wineskin (Mk. 2:22). New wine, fresh and still fermenting, bursts old wineskins that have become dry and less pliable. Jesus saw a need for the new – he was bringing new wine, as it were, and it could not be held in the old forms.

At the very same time he saw a need for the new Jesus saw a place for the old. He did not believe everything needed to be changed. Right when he talked about new wineskins he also talked about old cloth. No wise person, he said, patches an old garment with new cloth. Otherwise, when the garment is washed and the new cloth shrinks, it will cause a greater tear in the old garment (Mk. 2:21).

So Jesus expected a healthy balance between the old and the new. Everything did not need to change, but he expected a willingness to change because some things will and do change.

Will the Lord find in us a willingness to change? In some four months from now my identity will change as I move into retirement. I will no longer be your pastor. I will no longer be the minister of Salem United Church of Christ. If I have any business card at all to present to strangers, it will not be the one I carry now saying I am attached to you. And, likewise, in those same four months, the pastoral leadership of this church will change. Will we be ready for and willing to make the changes that will be required? Let's pray that we are and that the Lord finds us willing to change, for that is the only path to faith and health.

Well I have ranged through a number of texts this morning, mostly from the Gospel According to Mark. The focus text has been Mark 11:11: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

Linger now with that little phrase "it was already late." Translating that phrase into our present circumstances, "it was already late" means now is the time to decide, now is the time to make up your mind. It is not *too* late, but it *is* late. Do not put this off. Christ searches you now. You still have time to become a person of faith, a person of compassion, and a person willing to change. Don't put off becoming that person. Do it now so the Lord will find in you all he hopes to find on his reconnaissance mission today.