

“The Eye of the Storm”

Matthew 21:1-11

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The great storyteller, Garrison Keillor concluded one of his folklores about a young farmer by saying, “Life is not for the timid.” I agree with his appraisal and believe Jesus would, too. Often our Lord revealed his immeasurable courage in word and deed and one of those times was during his triumphant entry into Jerusalem as the Passover celebration drew near. To say the least, his actions that day were not timid but amazingly bold.

They also represented a dramatic departure from his usual style of ministry. Repeatedly, Jesus discouraged the disciples from revealing his identity and he refused to be openly honored as Messiah. All of this would change, though, on this historic day referred to as Palm Sunday.

Nearing the city of Jerusalem, he instructed his disciples to bring him a donkey so that he could ride it. When they returned, Jesus mounted this sacred animal and led a processional into the Holy City. Crowds lined the roadway spreading their cloaks before him, waving palm branches and shouting words of affirmation and praise.

You may be wondering what was so bold about this. **Why did this demand courage?** Jesus was not merely riding into a city filled with happy celebrants; he was entering hostile, enemy territory. He was riding into the “eye of the storm.”

His arrival, especially in this highly visible manner, would inevitably set up a confrontation with the religious leaders that he characterized as greedy, selfish, arrogant, unapproachable, insensitive and hypocritical. Look what happened the day after he arrived in the city. He went to the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, denouncing their immoral and unethical treatment of those that had come to worship.

This, in turn, would incense the religious leaders even more. Already they were upset with him and had talked about getting rid of him. These feelings and desires would reach a boiling point now. Jesus knew this and the danger he was facing. However, he proceeded with his plan to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, openly displaying his desire to be a new kind of leader.

“Life is not for the timid” and Jesus was everything but timid that day. **So, why did Jesus do this?** Why did he enter the city in this manner and put himself in harm’s way? I believe his **faith** would not allow him to ignore injustice and corruption.

Do you recall what Jesus read when he walked into the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Then he rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him and he began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’” Luke 4:18-21.

How could the person that made this bold claim ignore the plight of the people that were poor, confined, oppressed and blind? He could not. His faith had prepared him for this week of confrontation.

So did Dietrich Bonhoeffer's faith. He took the advice of friends that feared for his life and left Germany in 1939 to teach theology in the safety of Union Seminary. However, he came to the conclusion that the evils of Nazism and its corrupt leader, Hitler had to be exposed and opposed, so he returned to Germany from the safety of New York City. He entered the eye of the storm and continued speaking out against this brutal dictator. He paid with his life for this courageous decision when he was executed days before American forces would have liberated him.

Secondly, our Lord's **compassion** would not allow him to ignore the pain and confusion of the people. He sensed their frustration and despair as evidenced through his own tears for them as he looked at the city from a distance. He knew they were hurting and could not leave them hopeless. He had to help them and did.

Thirdly, his **faithfulness to God** would not allow him to ignore his mission. God sent him to save his people from their sins. No one else could do this. He could not abandon his divine mission and purpose though the cost to fulfill them would be high.

Faith in God, compassion for others and loyalty to the Father will cause us to do things that will require strong courage. These core values will not allow us to be timid. We will either act upon them or abandon them.

Martin Luther King Jr. discovered this. I have read where he never intended to become the Civil Rights leader that he did. He wanted to teach and preach and settle into a comfortable life with his family. Like any loving parent, he wanted to watch his children and grandchildren grow and help establish them in life. However, faith in God, compassion for others and loyalty to the Father demanded that he alter his plans and become the advocate for Civil Rights that this country needed. This meant that time after time he had to ride into the eye of the storm, confront evil and speak up for its victims. On April 4, 1968, he paid the ultimate price when an assassin's bullet cut his life short.

One of King's sermons that touched me is entitled, "A Knock at Midnight." It is based upon Luke 11:5-6, the parable of the friend that goes to a neighbor at midnight to ask for food. About this story, King writes, "Although this parable is concerned with the power and persistence of prayer, it may also serve as a basis for our thought concerning many contemporary problems and the role of the church in grappling with them. It is midnight in the parable. It is also midnight in our world and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn."

Continuing, King wrote, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and recovering its great historic mission, will speak fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will rekindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice and peace. Men far and

near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.”

King was not timid, was he, and neither should we be. We don't have that luxury in a world saturated with evil and evil doers. So let me ask you, “**What is the boldest thing you have ever done?**” Why did you do it? Would you do it again? Did you pay a high price? What did you accomplish?

What is the boldest thing you need to do? What do you need to do as a Christian, a church member or a citizen that will require courage? What do you need to change in your personal or professional life that is risky? Why haven't you done it? Has the time not been right or are you afraid?

Did you read Leonard Pitts article, “Three Steps Toward Being Whole” in the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* last week? He outlined three steps necessary for achieving equality in our country. His first suggestion caught my attention.

“Stop waiting for the next Martin Luther King Jr. There is no new Martin, Malcom or Marcus on the way and we do ourselves no favor by sitting around waiting for them to arrive. But if those men taught us nothing else, they taught us to be empowered people because revolution lies within each of us. All we need is the courage to grab it.”

Pitt's advice is similar to Ghandi's when he wrote, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” All change begins with good role models.

What will it take for you to boldly change your world? Do you need to adopt a new set of core values that includes faith in God, compassion for others and loyalty to the Father? Do you need to change your lifestyle? Do you need to look beyond your selfish desires and see a hurting world?

Where can you turn for help? Making these kinds of changes is not easy. Riding into the eye of a storm demands great courage. Who can help you do it? Let me suggest that you begin by looking to Jesus. He knows what it is like to face a daunting challenge and feel overwhelmed. He also knows what it is like to confront and tackle a challenge and overcome it. Let him guide you and give you the vision, wisdom, understanding, confidence and courage you will need.

Garrison Keillor was right, wasn't he? “Life is not for the timid.” This is why we need the Jesus that rode boldly into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with a mission and purpose and the resolve to accomplish both. I pray you have the courage to receive him into your heart today and follow where he leads.