**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC March 29, 2015**

***Blessed***

**A Sermon for Palm Sunday by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE WISDOM OF ST PAUL** Philippians 2:5-11

In these seven verses St Paul’s language brings to mind both the suffering of Jesus and his exultation. St. Paul is encouraging us to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus in our own service and praise

**THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** Isaiah 50:4-9

The Old Testament Witness for today is once again from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah foresaw the Messiah, not as an earthly king, a second King David, but as a servant, a suffering servant. The Messiah’s suffering will bring people closer to God.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 11:1-11 Mark’s Story of Palm Sunday

**SERMON**

I am always surprised after Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem, with the crowds waving palms and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” I’m surprised that Jesus turns around and travels back out to the small village of Bethany to spend the night, rather than staying in the big city.

But then, when I stop and think about it, what Jesus does makes perfect sense. Jesus was born, grew up, and spent his life in small villages and towns. And Jesus knows that once he overturns the moneychanger’s tables in the temple on Monday, a series of events will begin to unfold that are part of God’s plan for him, events are out of his control.

So when it gets late on Sunday, Jesus goes back to familiar, home-like surroundings for one last night with his disciples and the women who are also traveling with him, much as we might want to spend one more comfortable night at home before setting off on a difficult journey.

Jesus returning to Bethany is yet another indication of his humanity. Our Lord is like us.

But today at the beginning of Holy Week, I want to focus on the divinity of Jesus, rather than his humanity.

The people in Jerusalem who greet Jesus have heard that he is the long-awaited Messiah, who will usher in a new realm of peace and prosperity. The people show honor and respect as they strew their palms on the road and wave them in the air, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.”

The word “blessed” is the Bible has four different root words in Greek, so depending on the root word, “blessed” means slightly different things.

The root word for “blessed” in the Palm Sunday stories is related to the English word “eulogy,” which means “to speak well of.”

A eulogy at a funeral is usually high praise, and this is what the people lining the streets of Jerusalem are saying and doing, giving Jesus high praise, giving him high fives, you might say.

In fact, the people along the road are giving Jesus the highest praise, that he is blessed, for he is coming in the name of the Lord, bringing in the kingdom of their ancestor, King David, the legendary king of Israel.

But the people in the crowd had not read the prophet Isaiah or not read Isaiah closely enough.

For Jesus, although in fact a son of David, being related to King David through his stepfather Joseph, will be a suffering servant, not a mighty king.

The people shouting “Hosanna!” might have realized this if they had but seen what was before their eyes and thought about it.

Jesus is not standing in a golden chariot nor is he riding a mighty stallion. Jesus is riding a young donkey or in the Gospel of John, a colt. Jesus is at eye-level with the people, not towering above them. Jesus is riding a young and lowly beast of burden.

Jesus deserves high praise. Jesus deserves to be called “blessed,” but Jesus is not blessed for commanding worldly power and riches.

Jesus has rejected the allure of worldly power and riches after being tempted with them by Satan for forty days in the wilderness.

Jesus deserves high praise, high praise for welcoming all people into the Kingdom of God, high praise for treating people better than he would like to be treated, high praise for teaching about forgiveness and charity with parables, and discourses, high praise for healing the broken-hearted, and high praise for knowing and teaching the power of prayer.

But the people along the streets of Jerusalem are more worldly than Jesus. They are looking for a savior, but a savior from their current life. They are looking for and expecting a gospel of prosperity, whereas Jesus has told a rich young man to go and sell what he has, give the money to the poor, and follow him, in order to be saved, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus turns out to be a disappointment to the crowds, not to mention the chief priests and scribes of the religious establishment.

And so after Jesus is arrested and tried, when the crowds are asked whether they want the life of Barabbas or the life of Jesus spared, the crowds scream “Barabbas!”

And when Pilot asks them what then should be done with Jesus, the crowd yells, “Crucify him.”

It’s not a pretty picture. It’s not a pretty story. But it is what happened and what happens. The blameless, the innocent often suffer, as did the passengers and crewmembers on the German plane that was crashed deliberately by a deranged co-pilot into the French Alps last week.

But even though Jesus’ life has a seemingly tragic end on Good Friday, Jesus is still blessed. Jesus still deserves high praise, and he receives high praise.

But the praise comes from Jesus’ true followers both then and now, not from the anonymous crowd who can change from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify!” in a heartbeat. St Paul uses poetic language in his letter to the Philippians to convey that Jesus is indeed blessed: *“His is the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:9-11)*

Jesus is blessed, although a few short days after Palm Sunday you wouldn’t know it, when Jesus is crucified between two thieves.

But Jesus has God’s blessing, God’s high praise, and God’s blessing is what matters.

Jesus was blessed and called “blessed’ before he was born. When a young woman named Mary learns from the angel Gabriel that she is with child of the Holy Spirit and will bear a son, Mary is not thrilled. This is not good news. Mary is engaged but not married. She must remain a virgin for her husband or he will reject her.

So Mary, who is most likely in a state of panic, goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country. Elizabeth is also pregnant. When Elizabeth sees Mary, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth proclaims with a loud cry: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

‘Hail, Mary, full of grace, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”’

This is exactly what Mary needs to hear, that she is blessed with this baby, not cursed with it, and that her child is blessed too. Mary eventually goes back home to Joseph, and tells him what had happened. Joseph believes her. They marry, and Joseph raises Jesus as his own son.

Joseph’s understanding and generosity is blessed too. Joseph is a blessing from God to Mary in a culture where the stoning of women for adultery was common, although adulterous men didn’t seem to have the same problem.

And what is the meaning of all this for us this Palm Sunday?

The meaning is that even when our life seems at a low point, maybe at the lowest of low points, we are still blessed, still blessed by God, and deserving of high praise for all we have accomplished and tried to accomplish, all that we are and all that we’ve been, even when we didn’t succeed.

Jesus knew what he was getting into when he rode into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. Maybe he smiles when the people called him “blessed,” for Jesus knows “blessed” means something different to him than it does to the crowds.

For Jesus, “blessed” means knowing you are loved by God and that no one and no thing, that nothing, can take God’s love away from you. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Jesus’ mother Mary had expected to have a quiet life as a carpenter’s wife, raising a a family in Nazareth. Mary ends up being the mother of the Messiah, and endures watching him die a painful death on a cross. But Mary also was blessed. Her son’s death was not the end but the beginning.

And so for us too, whether we are being congratulated or scorned, whether we are relaxed or upset, whether we are happy or sad, let us remember that like Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we too are blessed, blessed by the very same God, that blesses them, the God of all.

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** *Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*

**BENEDICTION** And now let us go into the world to find our voice, listening to what God will say. Let us go into the world to find each other, reaching out to give and receive support. Let us go into the world and be amazed, knowing that God is always right there with us, knowing that we are truly blessed.Amen.

**West Center Congregational Church**

**United Church of Christ**

**101 Pondfield Road West, Bronxville, NY 10708**

**914-337-3829**

**westcenterucc@verizon.net**

[**www.westcenterchurch.org**](http://www.westcenterchurch.org)