

"THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED"
March 24, 1991

TEXT: Mark 11:9-10 "And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!"

In one of my favorite poems, Robert Frost wrote:

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--

I took the one less traveled by

And that has made all the difference."

Those words have special meaning for me as I remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. For, there, Jesus faced the same choice we all face. A choice between God's way and the world's way.

And the world's way must have been very tempting. As Jesus' little band of disciples struggled up the steep path to the city gate, they were given a tumultuous reception. Enthusiastic admirers lined the road to shout their welcome. Some cut branches from nearby trees and scattered them before him, much as their ancestors had done two centuries earlier, when Judas Maccabeus freed the city from the Syrians. Some even sang the psalm composed on that occasion: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!" As I said, it must have been very tempting.

But Jesus knew better. He knew that the crowd's way could lead only to disaster. And Luke tells us that he wept over the city, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

He knew a better way, but he also knew its dangers. Already there was a price on his head. The temple leaders hated and feared him. They would do everything in their power to destroy him. And the cheering crowds would continue their applause only as long as they continued to think he was something that he was not.

What they wanted was another Maccabeus, a conquering hero to overthrow the Romans and restore to Israel its place in the sun. That is why they shouted, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!" What they wanted was someone to restore the Golden Age of David. As soon as they discovered that Jesus was not that kind of Messiah, they would turn against him. And Jesus knew it. But he came anyway.

And he did so deliberately. Well ahead of time, he had made arrangements for the donkey on which he rode. When he sent those

two disciples on ahead, he told them exactly where they would find the animal and precisely what to say if anyone should challenge them. Most scholars today believe that the words, "The Lord had need of it," were a prearranged password. The whole thing had been carefully planned. What Jesus did that day was not naive or impetuous. He was betting his life on what he believed.

First of all, he believed in God. It took much more than just courage for him to set himself against the ugliness and hatred which lay before him. It took faith that, even when things look blackest, God's purpose is still being served.

When Jesus "set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem," he stood in the long tradition of Old Testament prophets who believed that God is the Lord of life, not merely its Creator. He believed that God is involved in history, constantly urging and prodding the world to become the community of love God always meant for us to be. And he knew that, whether we intend to or not, each of us either works for that process or against it.

In our own century, the American historian, Charles Beard, wrote, "The world is not just a bog in which men trample themselves in the mire and die, but something magnificent is going on here."

That is what Jesus believed, that "something magnificent is going on here" and that we are meant to be part of it. He had taught that the Kingdom of God was like a pearl of great price, for which a man would willingly give everything he had. And now he was betting his life on that belief.

He did not have to, of course. He could have saved his life had he wanted to. Instead of going to Jerusalem, he could have gone on back to Galilee, where he could have lived a normal, respectable --though somewhat meaningless-- life. He could have said, as many would say today, "Why should I stick my neck out? It's all so hopeless? The Romans are too powerful, the priests too rigid, the people too fickle. What's the use of throwing my life away?"

He could have done that. And who would have blamed him? And who in our day would ever have heard of him. He could have backed out, but he did not. He took the road less traveled because he believed that God is at work, even when things look blackest, bringing more light, more life, more love, into the world.

He believed that the future belongs to those who see and trust the best of things in the worst of times. Truth might seem a very poor defense against the temple police, and love a fragile shield against a shouting mob. But he knew that, in spite of everything, truth and love eventually prevail. And, in the end, it was Jesus, and not appearances, who triumphed. Caiaphas and

the Romans may have won in the short term, but the future belonged to Christ.

Jesus also believed in people. In spite of disappointments, he had faith that there would always be enough men and women who would choose his way. That is why he rode into Jerusalem the way he did. He was not the kind of person to draw attention to himself. We know that. Again and again, Mark shows him telling those he had healed to say nothing about it.

But, when the time came for him to disclose himself, he did so in a way which compelled the people to make a choice. He did so because he was confident there would always be enough who would choose love over hatred, compassion over selfishness, truth over falsehood.

He knew that some, perhaps even most, might choose the easy way out. They might allow themselves to be caught up in the frenzy of the crowd, to join their voices to those who shouted, "Crucify him!" Or they might just close their eyes and ears and ignore him. But he believed there would always be some who would follow him. He bet his Kingdom on that.

And once again he was right. There were only a few at first. But there were enough. And there still are, for this is a story for our time, too. Palm Sunday is every day and every place where compassion challenges selfishness, and love confronts indifference. And the Son of God still bets his Kingdom on us.

The forces that oppose him are more subtle now. There are no Roman soldiers to scourge him or to mock him with vulgar jests. There are no milling crowds to shout, "Crucify him!" And there is no cross sharply outlined against the horizon. The enemy is subtler now, but no less real. There is still that awful temptation to love things and use people, when God intends it to be the other way around. To put material desires ahead of spiritual necessities. To think of ourselves first, closing our eyes and ears to the needs of others. To worship in the temples of temporary diversion while ignoring the claims of the eternal. To hide behind our respectability, to anesthetize our consciences with noise and activity.

Today, as on that day so many centuries ago, the Spirit of Christ, still comes, less obviously, perhaps, but just as persistently, demanding that we, too, make a choice. A choice between Christ's way and the world's way, between life and death. He comes, as he always comes, risking everything on his faith in God and his faith in us. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Amen.