

March 25, 2018: Sixth Sunday of Lent / Palm Sunday (Year B)
Mark 11:1-11: Accident or On Purpose?

Accident? Or on purpose?

It's an important distinction. One we learn very early in life. It begins when we recognize that the consequences are less severe when we do something on accident, versus doing something on purpose. The difference having to do with intention. If we did not intend to do something; it was an accident. If we did intend to do something; it was on purpose.

I think probably one of the most common rookie mistakes new parents make is asking their child, after something has happened, whether it was on accident or on purpose, instead of making that determination on their own. As soon as a child knows their punishment hinges on the way they answer that question, their answer will be "accident" every time.

Eventually, they start answering the question before it is even asked. One of them punches the other one in the stomach. As the victim comes running, with tears in their eyes, the other one follows closely behind, repeating over and over again, "It was an accident. I didn't mean to do it." The conversation that follows is always entertaining.

"Did you punch your brother / sister in the stomach?"

"Yes. But it was an accident."

"How do you accidentally punch someone in the stomach?"

"He/she took some of my lego pieces. So I went to reach into the bin to grab some more, I lost my balance, and my fist fell right into their tummy."

You find yourself stuck between admiring their creativity, and bothered by their blatant dishonesty.

This is just one example of many that came to my mind as I was working on this sermon. Examples of people confusing accident and purpose, or intention, either unknowingly, or deliberately. One example that I kept coming back to I ultimately decided that while it was kind of funny, it was not appropriate. You can use your imagination. On second thought, don't. Just know that the point I am trying to make is that some things cannot happen by accident. They can only happen on purpose.

The story of Palm Sunday has "on purpose." written all over it.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. This is not some random destination. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will weep over the city of Jerusalem, describing it as "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." It is the center of religious authority for the Jewish faith. The place where his claims of having an intimate knowledge of God, and his controversial teachings, will create the greatest controversy, and put him in closest proximity to the people who most want to silence him.

Jesus came to a stop at the Mount of Olives before making his grand entrance. This is the first of several references to the words of the prophet Zechariah. He prophesied that the Mount of Olives would be the place where the great army of the faithful would gather under it's anointed leader, before marching on Jerusalem and liberating it from its captors. Jesus was deliberately leading people to associate him with this leader Zechariah spoke of.

Jesus then sent two of his disciples into a nearby village to commandeer a donkey for him to ride upon. The story reads like the scene taken from a spy novel. There are secret phrases they are to use; secret

signs they are to look for. It appears to be a very carefully orchestrated plan. The choice of a donkey, specifically a donkey that has never been ridden, is also extremely symbolic.

It points to additional references in Zechariah, like this one in 9:9, “Tell the daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” It also may have reminded people of the story of Solomon, told in 1 Kings, who rode his father David’s mule on his way to being proclaimed king. And the idea that this donkey has never been ridden implies that it has been set aside for a sacred purpose such as this one.

We are not told that Jesus instructed his followers to do what happened next, but this response may very well have been what he was hoping for. The throwing of their garments on the colt may have served as a reminder of the royal anointing of Jehu, an earlier Israelite king. (2 Kings 9:12-13). The branches could have pointed to the way the crowds received a man named Judas Maccabeus who was known for his efforts to purify the temple nearly two hundred years before Jesus. And the words the people sang as they welcome Jesus into the city, allude to Psalm 118:26, a psalm of praise to the God who rescues his people.

And last of all, the timing. Other self-proclaimed messiahs had ridden into the city of Jerusalem, and gone directly to the Temple, with the purpose of stirring the crowds into a frenzy, inciting them to violence in an attempt to overthrow the ruling powers. Jesus’ arrival was late in the day. By the time he arrived at the Temple it was nearly dark, the Temple was empty. He would not need the crowds to accomplish his objective. What he came to do, he would do alone.

I say all this to say that the events of Palm Sunday were no accident. Neither were the events that Palm Sunday set in motion, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion. Jesus did not just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. There are no random coincidences here. Jesus did all of this on purpose.

Really the same could be said of all that Jesus did, even the incarnation itself. The incarnation refers to the reality of Jesus becoming a human being. There is a passage of Scripture in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, know as the Christ Hymn, that describes the incarnation in a way that makes clear that none of what Jesus did was an accident. It’s found in Philippians 2:5-11, but I want to start reading in verse 1.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him 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.

It’s impossible to miss the intentionality with which Jesus approached his coming to earth and becoming one of us, suffering, and dying on the cross. None of it was an accident. Out of obedience and love for his heavenly Father, and for us, he did it all on purpose.

The same could be said of following Jesus...becoming like Jesus...experiencing the fullness of his salvation. None of that happens by accident either. It happens on purpose as well.

I want to clarify again what I mean, and what I believe the Scriptures mean, by this term salvation. Salvation includes being forgiven of your sins, being in right relationship with God, being transformed into the image of his Son Jesus, and experiencing the abundant life he intends for us. This is a process that begins the moment we believe, and continues for all eternity. Unfortunately, a lot of people think of salvation only in terms of being forgiven of your sins and going to heaven when you die. But as I have said, it is so much more than that, which is why some people talk about full salvation, to differentiate between what salvation truly is and what some people have reduced it to.

Whatever you want to call it, salvation doesn't happen by accident. We don't experience salvation by some random coincidence. It is a result of very intentional, deliberate and purposeful acts, both on the part of Jesus (and God) and on the part of ourselves.

Our theme for this Season of Lent was rehabilitation, or rehab. Maybe not the best choice of words, but it works. The series ended last Sunday but I thought it had some relevance to the point I wanted to make today. Rehabilitation doesn't happen on accident. If you have your knee replaced, you don't simply get out of bed the next day and have full, pain-free motion. You have to do something for that to happen. The same would be true for someone successfully completing a rehab program for drugs or alcohol. In any type of rehabilitation, we have a role to play. The same is true for salvation.

We can go back to Paul's words to the Philippians, where we can see clearly he is telling them to do something, "be of the same mind...have the same love, agree with one another, don't be selfish or conceited, regard others as better than yourselves, look to the interests of others, let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus."

For even more evidence we can look at the verse that immediately follows the section we read, verse 12,

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

We are to work out our salvation. We are to do things, on purpose, to become more like Jesus. What things? Read God's word. Pray. Attend Worship. Give. Serve. Things like this.

Think of the most spiritual, saintliest person you know, or have known. If you can, ask them if they do any of those things. They won't want to bring attention to themselves. But the answer will be yes.

But something else they will do, is give God the glory for the person they are becoming. Understanding this is absolutely crucial. Paul concludes this section in Philippians with this verse, verse 13.

for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

It is only because of God, working within us, that we can do the things he calls us to do, to become the people he died for us to be. In making it possible, God's grace also makes us responsible for what we do and don't do.

What will you do on purpose this week to grow closer to God?

What will you do on purpose this week, to become more like Jesus?

There are so many opportunities.
the usual...

There are so many opportunities.
the usual things. Prayer, Reading the Scriptures.

Then there will be Special Holy Week Services.

I'm not saying any one thing is better than the other. Just do something.

The only way to follow Jesus is on purpose.