

"One Day in a Life"

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 13, 2014 – Palm Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

If any of the disciples had kept a personal diary, perhaps something like this might have been written for today: "Triumphant entry. Cheering crowds. The long days and sacrifice have all been worth it. People have begun to realize that Jesus is no ordinary man, but truly one sent by God!"

Palm Sunday was but a single day in Jesus' life, but a day unlike any other. There are such times. David Atchinson, too, knew such a day, though it's been largely forgotten. It's a small footnote in history, but a notable one.

You could say David Atchinson did pretty well for a fellow born in Frogtown, Kentucky. He was fortunate enough to go on to college in his home state. Still who would have ever thought... well, that one day he would be President of the United States. He was, you know, but ever so briefly.

President Atchinson. That title and name don't seem to belong together. We never heard about him in that long list of Presidents we learned in school. Still, he served in that high capacity for one day, and here's how it happened.

After moving to Missouri Atchinson was appointed to fill out the term of a US Senator from that state. He was only 36 at the time but well-liked and able, enough so that he was elected to a subsequent term on his own merits. His colleagues also had high regard for him, and they showed that by selecting him President *Pro Tem* of the U.S. Senate. As such he was presiding officer of the upper chamber in the absence of the Vice-President.

Then, in the fall of 1848, Zachary Taylor was elected President and was set to be sworn in on March 4, 1849. That being a Sunday, Taylor thought this not a fitting activity for the Sabbath. So he refused to take the oath on that day and, instead, planned to take it on Monday, the 5th. When the outgoing James Polk, and his Vice-President, both resigned as of midnight Saturday, it created an immediate void at the top. The next in line to serve was the leader of the Senate. Enter David R. Atchinson into history.

So, how did he spend his one day in charge of the country? It's said that he went back to the boarding house where he stayed, and he slept. We may never know if he was relieved or sorry when Taylor was sworn in on Monday, but it's obvious that he didn't do much with his brief time.

Imagine yourself for a moment with all the powers of the presidency for 24 hours. What would you do with the opportunity? What changes would you make? What directives would you give? Would you be responsible for some lasting contribution to world peace and understanding? To a new sense of equity and equality among people? It's interesting to consider.

Now contrast Atchinson's time as President, dozing away the hours, with how Jesus filled that day spent in procession with the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. We get the feeling that every hour of that day, and of the few remaining, would be filled with intentional activity. Not a minute would be lost, though certainly some of those last days in his life would be painfully spent. A large journal could have been totally filled with all the crowded events and momentous decisions of that week.

Some of that time was spent in Christ's customary teaching and preaching. As he enters the temple he becomes incensed by the way that a lawful trade has been turned into an open-air market. Indeed, moneychangers were needed to take the various currencies and exchange them for one that could be used in the temple. Those who sold animals or grains for sacrifice served the very practical needs of those who came to worship there.

It wasn't the merchants' legitimate role that angered Jesus, but how they mishandled their business and desecrated that holy space. They hawked their wares as on a street corner and cheated the unsuspecting through excessive commissions or inflated prices. Temple officials may have profited as well by this money gouging, making it an even greater sacrilege.

A diary of events would also have shown that Jesus was regularly challenged by those who questioned his authority to do and say what he did. Some of the scribes heard him preaching the Good News then confronted him by saying, "Tell us, what right do you have to do these things?"

His challengers also tried to trap him by asking him about paying taxes. They were very deliberate about this particular question and worded it so that no matter how he answered, he would lose. Imagine their chagrin when he took a common coin and turned the question right back upon his accusers.

Those who opposed him became even more resolute that they must stop him. The diary of that week would reveal that Jesus was quite aware of the plots against him. He knew the fate that awaited him if he stayed true to his course. His parable of "The Wicked Tenants" acknowledges the evil that can well up in people's hearts when their power and profit are jeopardized.

Perhaps Jesus addressed this prophetic story to those who challenged him, for they were of the same mind as those leaders who had opposed God's other messengers over the years. The parable warns that they will be called to an accounting and their leadership will be stripped from them. They will think they have the upper hand in the short run, but they will be shown to be wrong.

Thursday evening he spends the Passover meal in the intimate company of his disciples. As he is at table with them he lifts up the symbols of bread and wine for his own body which will be broken and crushed on their behalf. Do they comprehend his meaning? Partially, perhaps. As he sits with companions, he finds himself in the presence of the one who will betray him and hand him over to the civil authority. How Judas must break his heart.

Jesus goes to the garden to pray, asking that his fate might be lifted from him; but recommitting himself to finish what he has started. He is now totally at God's directive. The soldiers come to seize him | and he goes without resistance because he knows they wield no power over him. For that matter neither the Council who tries him nor the Romans who pronounce his sentence can stop him. They may drain his mortal life from him, but they can't end the story.

There was so much to think about for Jesus on that short journey from Bethany into Jerusalem. How tempting it would have been to anyone else to have received the adulation of that roadside crowd, and to possess such personal power, that they might have bargained for a better fate. Whatever that fleeting temptation may have been at Gethsemane, we know it was rejected thoroughly and totally.

Unlike our forgotten President Atchinson, Jesus made use of every second that last week. Palm Sunday was one day in a life, but a day like no other—before him, nor ever to come. Like those who lined the streets on his entry we, today, are also given an opportunity to recognize his coming into our lives. The story continues on. Like that original crowd, we can turn to him, or turn away from him. They had a choice, and we have a choice.

Through the continuing presence of our Savior we are given a great gift, but we can also squander this opportunity. As with our Master, we should consider carefully how we spend our little time and what is right there for our receiving. For you see, when Christ fully enters into a person, when Christ is allowed the difference he can make, the final diary of our life will show that we are never the same again.