“Where are we going?” - Stephanie Sorge, 3.24.24

Thirty years ago, Forrest Gump ran into movie theaters. It garnered Oscar nominations in 13 categories and won 6 of them, including awards for Best Picture, Director, Actor, and Writing.[[1]](#footnote-1) In one scene, “for no particular reason,” Forrest decides to go for a little run. That run continues for three years, two months, 14 days, and 16 hours, crossing the United States nearly five times with over 15,000 miles. People start following him, by the thousands, and then one day, he stops. As the crowd following him also stops, one person says, “Quiet, he’s going to say something!” He does. “I’m pretty tired, think I’ll go home now.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus’s public ministry spanned roughly the same amount of time, crossing Judea, Galilee, and the surrounding areas a few times. Along the way, he attracted many followers. This scene of his entry into Jerusalem is a pivotal one in each of the four gospels, but Mark’s version reminds me a bit more of the fictional Forrest Gump. After all the fanfare, Jesus and his disciples go to the temple, look around, and since it’s late in the evening, they simply return to Bethany. That’s it.

There is so much significance and symbolism in this story. This entry was modeled after Caesar’s. It’s celebrated as Jesus’s “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem, in many ways a climax of his ministry, if we privilege what appears to be success and victory. This is the crescendo. Jesus has arrived! So it’s a little anti-climactic when, after a walk to the temple, he decides it’s time to head back to Bethany for a good night’s sleep.

Where are we going? To Jerusalem!

Jerusalem was diverse, home to many Diaspora Jewish communities. There was a great deal of wealth in the city, which was also a center of political and religious power. As home to the temple, it was the primary place for pilgrimage. Jews who were able to do so were expected to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. The already bustling city would have been even more festive and full of people gathering to celebrate the Passover as Jesus made his way into the city.

In Mark’s Gospel, this is preceded by Jesus’s three predictions of his suffering and death. He set the scene and told the disciples what to expect. The last few weeks, we’ve been in passages that follow this one. We’ve seen Jesus’s escalating and direct confrontations with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Where are we going? To Jerusalem. But where are we really going? On the inevitable journey to the cross.

In John’s Gospel, it’s the death of Lazarus that brings Jesus back to Bethany, and then Jerusalem. His disciples protest, “Jesus, they were just trying to kill you there, and you want to go back?” There is no doubt what it means for Jesus to return to Judea and Jerusalem. It’s death. And the stakes are high for the disciples, too. Thomas - the disciple often disparaged as the Doubter - is the one who speaks up there, saying, “Let us also go, so that we may die with him.”

Thomas ran towards the fire. So did Harriet Tubman, who successfully escaped from her enslavers - twice - and then risked her life and freedom more than a dozen times, returning to the south to bring others to safety. Dietrich Bonhoeffer chose to return to Nazi Germany. Martin Luther King, Jr. kept his scheduled engagement in Memphis, despite credible death threats. Alexei Navalny was safe in Germany, following a nearly successful assassination attempt on his life, and he chose to return to Russia.

These and other extraordinary people are rightly celebrated and venerated. Like Jesus, they journeyed to the places where their own death, if not certain, was certainly more likely. They fit into a hero narrative that we love to tell. But there are some problems with that narrative.

David LaMotte - who we will welcome to Harrisonburg in June - discusses the Hero myth in his book, *You are Changing the World: Whether You Like it Or Not.*[[3]](#footnote-3) David points to the “easy instructions” offered by the hero myth. Step one: wait for the crisis. Step two: wait for the hero. Step three: “There is seldom a step three because… we end up waiting forever for the crisis and the hero to emerge.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Instead, throughout the book, LaMotte keeps coming back to the story of Rosa Parks, someone who is venerated as a hero for her actions on one day. In reality, she was part of a much larger movement, in which she had been an active participant and leader for decades before and after the bus incident.

Agents of long-term change, even the ones we elevate as saints and heroes - are very rarely one-time actors responding to a particular crisis. They are people who are part of larger movements working in a sustained way for the change that is needed. That’s why I love Mark’s version of this story. The fervor of the parade and entry into Jerusalem is balanced by the mundane return to Bethany at the end of the day.

Where are we going? To Bethany!

Bethany is about two miles outside of Jerusalem, and from the Gospel stories, we know that some of Jesus’s closest friends lived there. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is at the home of his friend, Simon, a leper. Not a place of power or prestige by any stretch. It is there that an unnamed woman comes with a jar of costly perfume, which she breaks in order to pour the oil on Jesus’s head. While some protest this extravagant waste - Judas isn’t singled out in this version - Jesus celebrates this act, and says that she is anointing his body for burial.

Bethany is a haven from Jerusalem. It’s a place where Jesus can be with his friends, including the outcasts and those who aren’t normally welcomed in polite society. We’re talking about Jesus, so it’s not like there is any place where he is free from all conflict, but of all places, this seems to be a safe space, a place where he can come and recharge and be himself most fully and authentically. Bethany is the place where Jesus prepares for the crisis on the horizon.

Where are we going? We are going to the cross.

There were three pilgrimage paths from Galilee to Jerusalem in Jesus’s day. The most direct route took just three days, but since it went through Samaria, most Jews tended to avoid it in favor of safer routes. The longest route traveled along the western coastal plain, avoiding Samaria. The eastern route crossed the Jordan River twice in order to avoid going into Samaria, bringing travelers close to Jericho. This is likely the route Jesus took, according to Mark’s gospel, since the healing of Bartimaeus in Jericho immediately precedes the entry into Jerusalem.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, Jesus didn’t avoid Samaria, and he and his disciples had traveled all over, in territories both friendly and not so friendly. On his travels, he encountered a diverse range of people, most of whom others would have ignored or avoided. That’s how he met Simon, the leper who hosted Jesus and his disciples in Bethany. It’s how he met the woman who recognized the significance of this person and the moment, who held nothing back in giving her precious oil.

Where are we going? We enter this week of Palms and Passion with our eyes fixed on Jerusalem. Each year we take this pilgrimage to the cross. Jesus invites us to follow him, and while that journey will sometimes lead followers to give up their own lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel - as it did for Bonhoeffer, King, and others - it’s really about the long journey that precedes it.

Sometimes where we’re going isn’t nearly as important as how we get there. No one goes straight to the cross to be a hero or martyr. Not even Jesus. It’s the daily journey that leads us there. A journey in which we meet people we would not otherwise meet, including those who are often not welcome elsewhere. Those meetings and relationships change our lives, and can change the course of our journey, sometimes in especially significant ways.

David LaMotte shares his own stories of these small but significant moments. A single encouraging comment from another Summer Staffer at Montreat changed the course of his life and led to his career as musician. Another course change from music to peacemaking began with seeds sewn when LaMotte was a JMU student, interning at what is now the Fairfield Center. David and his wife Deanna remain very involved with a nonprofit they began in Guatemala, which was birthed from their experiences and the people they encountered on their honeymoon there. The honeymoon destination was decided on a lark after running into a friend who had just returned from a language immersion school there, excited to share stories about her experience. The journey often changes the destination, if we are open to the Spirit’s leading.

On each day of our journey, we encounter crossroads of one kind or another. Sometimes those crossroads invite us to grand choices and actions, but far more often, we’re making many more small and mundane choices as we make our way down the road. We often don’t know in the moment which small acts and decisions will bloom into much larger things. As we travel, the destination may change or be clarified. It’s the daily journey that shapes us as followers of Jesus.

So, where are we going? God only knows. The Spirit empowers us to take it one faithful step at a time, journeying together as we follow Jesus. Amen.

1. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109830/awards/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/31/the-real-life-forrest-gump-why-did-bob-pope-run-across-the-us-five-times#:~:text=Gump%20runs%20for%20three%20years,that%20scene%20and%20thought%3A%20cute. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. p. 47, *You are Changing the World*… by David LaMotte [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, p. 55-56 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/3-pilgrimage-paths-from-galilee-to-jerusalem/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)