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UNSTUCK: FROM THE PAST Michael B. Beough
Mark 11:1-11 April 5, 2009
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In Malachi 3:10, God promises to open the windows of heaven and pour down for us an overflowing blessing. This has been the theme verse for our worship series UNSTUCK. What keeps the windows stuck shut? What prevents the windows from opening? Seems like a fitting thing to ask ourselves through the season of Lent. What does God need to do in my life to get the windows unstuck? Am I willing to let God do that?

We conclude this series today by looking at the past as one of those things that Jesus came to get us unstuck from.

Have you ever known anyone who was stuck to the past? All of us are stuck to it to one degree or another. The past controls us through things we cannot let go of: guilt, anger, remorse, habits, relationships gone awry. Even beliefs and experiences can keep us today from experiencing the overflowing blessings God wants to pour down for us.

Remember Lot's wife? It is a great story in the Old Testament. God tells Lot to flee from Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot gets his wife and two daughters on the backs of camels and off they go to a new beginning. God tells them not to look back. Leave the past behind. Unfortunately, Lot's wife can't resist. She just has to look back one more time. When she does, she turns into a pillar of salt. I think the salt is significant. It was a precious commodity in those days, worth lots of money. In some ways, she was worth more dead than alive. Lot's wife illustrates what happens when we live our lives by looking backward.

It is what happens when we keep looking back after God has called us out to a new life. The past poisons the future. In Luke 9:62, Jesus says, "No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of heaven." Not many of us plow anymore. Try driving by looking backward. Or try living by looking back.

One of our members wrote me about the difficulty and necessity of letting go of the past and gave me permission to mention it. She recounted how her relationship with her mother controlled her life until about fifteen years ago. Here are her own words.

I got past my mother about fifteen years ago, at midlife, after listening to other women talk about their mothers in such a loving way. The setting was a support group for people who were taking care of aging parents who required intermittent or constant care. I had become acutely aware that midlife brings loss, loss of a lot of things. In this group, I was finally able:

*(1) to understand what I missed by not getting a decent mother,
(2) that there was no longer any point in hoping and/or waiting because it was never going to happen, and
(3) to spend time grieving what could never be.*

The next step is to lay it down and get on with other things. No, I do not think that the lack of a decent mother can ever be made up. It was supposed to have been there for the child, it wasn't, and no one or no event can ever fill that void. The void is there forever.

Looking back in a good way, she says she can now see that Jesus must have been with her through the whole ordeal because "Anyone without Jesus through this would have gone completely berserk."

This is what I want us to know about the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to break the hold our past has on us. I am talking about the things in our past that keep us from becoming the person God wants us to be. I believe it is one of Satan's favorite ploys to keep us dwelling on the past and living out of the past that God wants us to let go of. When we can't let go of the past, Satan senses a victory over God.

But do we really understand what this means? The people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem did not understand this about Jesus. They actually thought he came to Jerusalem to restore the past. They want him to be the next earthly king with an army big enough to drive out the Romans. They hailed him as king. They thought of him as the next King David. That is why they were out on the road with palm branches and shouting hosannas.

However, what a surprise in store for them! They didn't know that Jesus had another plan in his mind and heart. It grieved him that the people were still living in the past. They clung to a religious practice that had grown heartless and dogmatic. They had stopped listening to the prophets who called for repentance and a fresh turning to God. They were victims of a past that could not save them, a past that Satan was using to bring down the family of God.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, it was a freedom march. It was liberation day. He marched into Jerusalem to set us free. He died for our freedom, freedom from the past and freedom from sin. He died to free us to serve God with intelligence, imagination, and love. He died so that we might become disciples who give their lives to make a difference in the world. He knew it would take his death on a cross. He knew his death would empower all who believe in him to let go, to start again.

II Corinthians 5:17 says it this way: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has

become new!" And Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Can we let go? Will we believe?

I have told before about a boy I didn't treat too kindly on a backpack trip in Colorado. The short version is that I, as adult leader, conspired to put rocks in his backpack. Why? Because his pack was so light he was literally skipping up the mountain. Backpacking is supposed to be hard work. It was for me.

When he wasn't looking, I loaded this Junior High kid's pack with big rocks. I wanted to see what he would do when he went to put it on. To my disappointment, he did nothing. He put it on as if he didn't notice the difference, and off we went up the trail. What a bummer! Later, I noticed he was still skipping up the mountain. When we got to our campsite, I demanded that he take the rocks out of his pack. He didn't smile, but said rather pointedly, "Oh, I took those out a long time ago."

The past is like those rocks in the backpack. Life loads us down with them. Satan is always throwing some in. We may even load some in ourselves and keep them there just because. They keep us from going up the mountain. They tire us out. They dominate our souls and give Satan a prime opportunity to take over our lives. The good news is that Jesus is here with us today to say to us, "Oh, I took those out a long time ago." If you believe in me and trust in me and follow me, I will make of you a new creation.

Today we wave palm branches and shout "Hosanna!" which means "save us." We hail Jesus as King. Let it be for the right reason and with courage let us go with him to the cross where the past is finished and gone and all things become brand new.