

Mark 11: 1-11

“God Moments: Untethered Faith”

March 25, 2018

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I have been called many things in my day.

Among them, however, is not an NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship Tournament prognosticator.

Some of you know what I’m talking about – March Madness – this time of year when 64 college basketball teams are selected to play in a single elimination tournament that whittles away the field of teams – one-by-one – until there is only one winner – this year that winner will be crowned on April 2nd in the National Championship game – the day after Easter!

Like, I said, I’ve never been known as a March Madness prognosticator – and this year has not been any different.

I did okay in the first round – if you don’t consider my picks in the South Tier of the bracket.

I only picked two right – Tennessee over Wright State & Cincinnati over Georgia State – then those two teams proceeded to lose in the second round of play – and my bracket is busted on the left side as I had picked Cincinnati to go to the national championship game on April 2nd.

Maybe you heard about UMBC – University of Maryland Baltimore County Retrievers the lowest seeded team in the Southern Tier bracket (#16) who beat the highest seeded team in that bracket (#1) Virginia Cavaliers. It was the first time in the NCAA Men’s Championship that a 16 seed beat a 1 seed – March 16th “Another day that will live in infamy.”

Maybe you’ve heard about, Sister Jean the spiritual advisor and “unofficial coach” to the Loyola-Chicago Ramblers – an American Catholic research university in Chicago, Illinois founded by the Jesuits in 1870. The 11th seeded Ramblers reached the “Sweet Sixteen” by defeating the 6th seeded University of Miami in the first round then felling the #3 seed Tennessee Volunteers in the second round; they then advanced to the Elite Eight by defeating #7 seeded Nevada by one point. Last night, they made it into the Final Four by beating #9 seeded Kansas State.

If you’re a bit older, you may recall 35 years ago, in 1983, when the N.C. State Wolfpack squeaked into the NCAA Tournament. This team was led by a young coach named Jim Valvano and together they starred in one of the greatest Cinderella story in the history of College Basketball. It’s the game those three old guys are talking about in the Courtside Virtual Reality promo that’s been airing during the tournament – the tag line is “Never seen anything like it!”

At the beginning of March 1983, no one was paying much attention to the Wolfpack.

That was until coach Valvano and his team began marching through the brackets – they beat Pepperdine, UNLV, Utah and the powerful Virginia Cavaliers.

The team was met by crowds in airports and pep rallies who would treat them like rock stars.

Valvano was a joyous entertainer in front of a crowd...and a master motivator on the sidelines.

[9:30 a.m. – “Check this brief clip from ESPN...” – play video – fade out at 1:19 when it fades to black after the words ‘Survive and Advance’ show on screen.]

They took to the court in the final game against a star-studded Houston team with names like Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler.

It became one of the greatest basketball games of all time, ending in a stunning fashion.

In the final seconds N.C. State’s Dereck Whittenburg threw up a 30-foot air ball, which Lorenzo Charles slammed home for a Wolfpack victory.

[9:30 a.m. – pick up manuscript from here...]

The video of Jim Valvano sprinting around the court, looking for someone to hug, is still played every year on television.

Nothing says “March Madness” like that 1983 National Championship game 35 years ago – and it tugs at our hearts because Valvano died from cancer just 10 years later.

Take that image of the champions joyously racing onto center court when the final buzzer sounds – and place it in Jerusalem.

The year is not 1983, it is A.D. 33 – give or take five or six years.

Thousands have gathered for their Passover celebration in the holy city and the buzz is building.

A procession is planned by Jesus and his disciples – and before you know it – it has become a kind of Jerusalem March Madness.

Just like fans today fill out brackets and try to guess who will make it to the Final Four, the residents of Jerusalem were trying to figure out who would come out on top.

Some of the locals were betting on a new ruler who would establish the kingdom of their ancestor David (v.10).

Others in Jerusalem wanted a religious leader such as the high priest to come out on top.

The Romans’ political machinery wanted their appointee Pilate to keep the peace via a show of military force.

And the disciples wanted Jesus to be their champion – however, they weren’t exactly sure what Jesus’ victory would look like.

This is where we find ourselves today – Palm Sunday 2018.

We watch Jesus march into Jerusalem on a thrilling, unpredictable ride.

Every opponent he faces is going to test him and try to defeat him.

It’s a bit of a single-elimination tournament with no do-overs and no second chances.

We hope, like the disciples, that Jesus will cut through the chaos and emerge as champion...

What kind of winner though do we want him to be?

What kind of champion does God want him to be?

What kind of prognostication does Palm Sunday and this Holy Week make regarding our lives?

One might say, that this Palm Sunday story reveals that Jesus needs us to be part of the team.

Mark tells us that Jesus instructs two of the disciples to go ahead of them and find a colt. If anyone questions why they are untying the colt to respond, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” (vv. 1-3)

“The Lord needs it.” Kind of a surprise?

Jesus needs a stranger’s animal that he may ride into the city. One would think that the all-powerful Son of God wouldn’t need a thing...the gospel of Mark indicates otherwise. Jesus needed a colt and a cooperative animal owner.

So, what does the Lord need from us?

Probably not a colt.

What about our time, our efforts, our talents?

Maybe it’s about being one of Jesus’ teammates.

David Brooks writes, “About once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued. ... They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all.”

Such people, says Brooks, have a generous spirit and depth-filled character. These are the kind of people who say “yes” when Jesus asks them to contribute time, effort and talent. They think less about themselves and more about what they can do for others. This is what makes a good teammate.

The caution is – if your plate is already too full – you need to discern what to let-go, otherwise, the whole plate can topple.

Any good team needs a good leader and Jesus did not shirk his leadership potential.

He enters Jerusalem and as Mark tells us people spread their cloaks and palm branches upon the road.

All around one could hear the shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (vv. 8-10)

In Old Testament times, spreading cloaks on the road was done for kings to walk on (2 Kings 9:13). The shouts of the crowd were clearly intended to identify Jesus as their king, the son of David. Jesus rose to the occasion not shying away from this role with some form of false humility – rather he embraced it. He entered Jerusalem as a leader, a king.

What kind of leader though, is Jesus?

Ron Edmondson talks about how Jesus is a leader who invests in people that others would have dismissed. A fisherman named Peter; a tax collector named Matthew; a woman named Mary who had seven demons cast out of her. People like me and you.

Jesus practices servant leadership. Something that becomes vitally & visually represented later this week when he takes up the basin and towel and washes the disciples' feet at the Last Supper – even the one who would betray him; the one who would deny him; and all who would desert him. And he gives them (and us) a command at that Thursday night encounter to share in the responsibility – that the world will know we are his disciples by the way we love one another as he has loved us.

Jesus invites us to become part of the “succession plan” to carry on the work he began after he is gone.

Jesus invests in people by serving them and then entrusting them to carry forward his work.

Jesus is a true champion because he looks beyond his own achievements to the continuation of his ministry and mission.

And, Jesus could do this because he understood success differently than most.

He was willing to suffer betrayal and arrest.

He stood before the Jewish council and Pontius Pilate on Good Friday and said not a word when the crucifixion order was announced.

Jesus knew he was being marked for elimination.

I don't know about you – but I struggle with this – because I can find myself being pulled toward the world's definition of success – we expect champions to be victorious, happy, rich. We wear jerseys with their names and numbers on them because we want to feel like winners. When they lose we start looking for another player to follow.

Jesus, however, trusts God through a week of defeats by walking faithfully to the cross and he invites us to pick up our crosses and follow him.

Winning by losing – losing self-righteousness to find true-righteousness – as defined by God.

Jerusalem's “March Madness” ends with the chaos of the cross.

Instead of the winning buzzer beater shot, Jesus gives a loud cry, takes his last breath and dies.

And yet, something surprising and inspiring occurs, a Roman centurion, on guard to make sure *this Jesus must die* looks up at him and declares, “Truly this man was God's son!” (15:39)

Like the UMBC Retrievers beating the Virginia Cavaliers in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, no one saw that Centurion's declaration coming.

An officer of the Roman Empire – a member of the opposite team – sees that Jesus is the true champion.

He identifies Jesus as the Son of God – victorious in his faithfulness to God.

Jesus took it on faith that trusting God is true success and then this Roman Centurion discovers the very same.

Jesus demonstrates on the cross how far he will go to show us the endless, unconditional, life-saving love of God. And this changes the heart of a Roman soldier.

Our hearts can be changed as well.

While the cross feels like the end – don't forget Jim Valvano and the N.C. State Wolfpack's 1983 victory – with two-seconds on the clock they found a way to beat the buzzer and win...
There is still one more buzzer beating win at the end of this week...

As we march with Jesus through Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we can find ways to define success.

AS we listen for what the Lord needs from us and how we might respond.

AS we look to Jesus – our leader and participate in his servant-leadership.

AS we stand at the foot of the cross and recognize we are seeing success defined in a way that most would call defeat.

This day and this week reminds us that our God is the God who brings life from what appears to be death-like circumstance.

Amen and Amen.