

March 28th, 2021

Mark 11:1-11 “In for a Pound”

Thank you for assembling here for worship. And when I say “here,” I mean both in the sanctuary and online. We made a decision a long time ago that we’d continue streaming even when we returned to the sanctuary. We’re a church of inclusion, not exclusion and we recognize that some folks aren’t able to gather here in the sanctuary for a variety of reasons. All are welcome, in this physical *and* virtual space.

This is the beginning of Holy Week. This is the last Sunday we have together before we return next week for Resurrection Day. Something we’ve got to be careful about is treating this Sunday like a “pre-Easter warm-up.” On Palm Sunday, we wave our palms and play peppy songs like “All Glory, Laud and Honor” and “Le-lo-Lay-lo.” No doubt, there’s a lot to celebrate this week. We’re meeting together in this physical space for the first time in 53 weeks! That’s a big deal! So yes, let’s pause, take a deep breath, and celebrate this moment before I dig into this scripture and mess it all up for everybody.

The difficulty of observing Christmas, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Easter is that you’re dealing with the same stories every year. Well, yeah, but we’ve got four gospel writers to choose from. Variety, right? Yeah, but only two of them have the Christmas story. Pentecost is worse, because we’ve only got the Book of Acts. Even the editors of the lectionary seem to be throwing up their hands this year when it comes to Palm Sunday. They’re saying, “Here, you can use either Mark or John. Whatever floats your boat. Have fun.” I mean, how many different ways can we look at this story? Surely we’ve heard them all, right? Well thanks be to God for good Bible scholars and commentators who live and breathe to give us all something new to chew on. Thanks be to God for Robb McCoy and Eric Fistler, hosts of Pulpit Fiction, “A weekly lectionary podcast for preachers, seekers, and Bible geeks.” For the first time in I don’t know how long, they made me stop and look at this story in a way I never thought of.

Palm Sunday is the story of how Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time before he was arrested, tried, and crucified. Everything in the gospels prior to this event takes place during his 3 years of public ministry. From here, it's all about his last seven days. That's why we call this stretch before Easter "Holy Week" and it's why this Sunday is always "Palm Sunday." Here's a recap of the story for you: Jesus is approaching Jerusalem and sends two of his disciples to get a colt that has never been ridden before (or a donkey depending on which gospel you're reading.) The disciples go to get the colt and, as one would hope, bystanders ask them, "Why are you taking this colt?" They say, "Jesus needs it" which, oddly enough, seems to be a satisfactory answer for the bystanders. After all, Jesus is a popular, well-known character. Or at least he's popular with some. Maybe a better way to put it is that he's *unpopular* with all the right people. Once the disciples brought the colt out, a crowd gathers. Some in the crowd throw cloaks on the colt so Jesus can ride it. Other people use their cloaks and palm branches to sort of "pave the road" for Jesus. Then the crowd starts shouting, "Hosanna" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" and "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor King David." We're in Mark's gospel this week, so after he enters the city, Jesus immediately goes to the temple to ... well ... start a riot. But we already covered that story a few weeks ago. And there you have it. Every year, one week before Easter, we hear one of the four gospel writer's version of this story. But *what* is this story *about*? Is this the story about Jesus' "triumphal entry into Jerusalem" as most folks call it? Is this about the crowds who waved palm branches and shouted "hosanna" on this day, but a week later shouted, "Crucify him?" Maybe not.

Let's take a closer look at Jesus' entrance into the city. For a while now, scholars and commentators have written about the significance of the gate Jesus used to enter Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judah, used the Jaffa Gate or the West Gate to enter Jerusalem when he came to town from Caesarea Marittima on the Mediterranean Sea. Whenever Pilate came to town, the Jaffa gates would open and he would

process into the city. Thousands would line the street, throwing flowers and laurels, waving, reaching out and shouting Pilate's praises. Security guards would watch the crowd for dissidents, agitators, and zealots, intent on doing harm. Pilate would enter the gate sitting tall in his chariot, looking every bit the champion he was meant to be. The mantle of Roman authority rested easily on his shoulders as he climbed higher to the center of the city, where he would take his rightful place as Judea's Lord Protector. You want to talk about a "triumphal entry," this was it. Historians say that it stands to reason that Pilate would always come to Jerusalem for Passover. After all, this was *the* High Holy day of the Jewish calendar. Multitudes of faithful Jews from all over the region would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem so they could make their Passover sacrifices at the Temple so the high priest could intercede on behalf of God and declare their sins forgiven. It was the Roman Governor's job to keep peace in the land, and Passover was a celebration of the end of Israel's slavery under their Egyptian oppressors. A lot of revolutionary types saw Rome as an oppressor too, so it was a strategic move for Pilate and his army to parade into town to remind the Jews who was *really* in charge. That's what's happening at the West Gate.

Meanwhile, on the East gate, Jesus was coming into town from Galilee in a different kind of parade. And here's where Fistler and McCoy blew my mind. They suggested that the parade on the East side of the city was a *parody* of the one happening on the West side. By definition, a parody is a comical imitation of another work. When I think "parody" I think sketch comedy on Saturday Night Live, or movies like *Young Frankenstein*. I think of court jesters in medieval times acting out a battle where the kingdom's enemies are portrayed as bumbling fools. I *don't* think of stories from the gospels being parodies. And yet, this is what Fistler and McCoy laid out on the table in their podcast. But think about it. If parody is a comical imitation of another work, this fits the bill. On the West side of the city, you've got a carefully staged procession where the one who represents the governing power of the Roman Empire is hailed as Lord Protector of the Realm. On the East side, there's another carefully staged royal entry taking place too. Wait,

you mean this *wasn't* just a parade of opportunity? Because that's the way we've always treated it in the church! It was spontaneous, right?

Consider how we treat the story of Rosa Parks. We tell the story as if this random yet brave black woman in Montgomery, Alabama just happened to be riding home on a bus when she refused to give up her seat to a white man thus giving birth to the Civil Rights Movement! We don't talk about the training that she and multitudes of other African Americans had in order to prepare them for this scenario so they could challenge the evils of racial segregation in the courts. "Oops! This just happened out of the blue!" The same thing is going on here in Jerusalem. This was a pre-planned entrance. Jesus and probably others knew ahead of time where to find the colt and how to obtain it. Jesus and others knew that by riding into Jerusalem on this colt, he'd be reflecting the famous Messianic prophesy from Zechariah about the "King who comes to you; triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey; on a colt, the foal of a colt." Jesus' entry into Jerusalem would be seen as a symbol of salvation. The return of God's king to God's people. And it was staged to look like a parody of what was happening on the opposite gate of the city. There was a multitude of followers there shouting for everyone to hear, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Save us! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!" This is dangerous language. It's inflammatory. The entire spectacle from riding a colt, to spreading the cloaks, to proclaiming Jesus as king was treasonous. And everyone involved knew it. They were using what they had available to them to challenge and poke fun of what was happening at the West Gate. The parodies are clear – Jesus is riding a donkey, not a chariot. He will be crowned with thorns, not laurels. He will weep over Jerusalem, not celebrate it. He will drive out the corruption in the temple, not participate in it.

Something that I want to be clear about is that the folks who were at the West Gate welcoming Pilate were not bad people. They were good parents and loyal citizens. They were faithful wives and husbands. They participated in their community – went to weddings and funerals,

generously offered help and advice, owned businesses and provided jobs. They accepted their position as a given. They weren't evil. But they were part of a corrupt system that perpetuated itself. They considered their lives and the lives of those not as fortunate as them as just the way things were. They didn't know any better.

On the flip side, the folks on the East side who welcomed Jesus were not "better" than anyone else in the city because they were "woke." They just recognized that Jesus was a different kind of king. One who willingly enters into the "messiness" of life on earth to show us a new way. One who rejected the Earthly kingdoms' reigns of injustice, oppression and terror in order to show all people God's reign of love, justice, peace, and freedom. But we all know that acting on behalf of those things is a dangerous undertaking. The more visible Martin Luther King Jr. became, the more crowds he attracted. The more the crowds lauded him, the more the enemy pursued him. Taking a stand for love, justice, peace, and freedom may get you killed. King realized it. Jesus realized it. And yet we must continue to stand for love, justice, peace and freedom despite its cost. And that is where we enter into Holy Week. Yes, it's fun to wave our palms around and shout "Hosanna!" Especially on the first day that we're able to return to this space to worship. But remember that "hosanna" means, "save us." May you use this final week before Easter as a time of reflection as we follow Jesus' path from the East gate of Jerusalem to the cross.