



Roanoke, Virginia

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

“Hosanna”

Mark 11:1-11

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Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”’ ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, ‘*What are you doing, untying the colt?*’ ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.



Sermon:

“There’s a light at the end of this tunnel.” I feel it. I can hear people say it. “There’s a light at the end of this tunnel.” Vaccinations, for many, are on the rise. Slowly, children have been returning to school. Death tolls are beginning to drop. And we can sense a not-so-distant future when restrictions may be eased. There is much about this season that is hopeful.

Simultaneously, we know there are those who wait anxiously for their turn at a vaccine, and virus variants persist. Adults and children who are immunocompromised wonder what reopening means for their health and safety. And somehow, a return to “normal” for this country means the unveiling of deep-seeded racism and three mass shootings within ten days.

Hope to despair. Despair to hope.

Debie Thomas writes, “On the one hand, the light at the end of the tunnel revives and renews us. On the other hand, it shows us just how bleak and dismal the tunnel has been.”ⁱ It doesn’t take us humans long to go from praise to pain.

It’s a fitting mood for the start of Holy Week, really. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem. Throngs of men, women, and children clapped and cheered as they saw him approach the city’s East Gate. They grabbed palm branches and the cloaks off their backs, whatever they could muster, to wave and lay a carpet before him. In my mind’s eye, it must have been a little ramshackle, this impromptu parade, but I bet it was loud and joyous.

When I was a child, we would recreate the scene on the front steps of First Presbyterian Church, Greer. Our children’s choir donned our white robes and waved our palm branches high as the church filed out after the benediction. We welcomed Holy Week with the loudest, most Southern “Hosannas!” you ever heard. I must have thought “Hosanna” was just another name for Jesus. When we call out the word, it’s easy to assume it means something akin to “You’re amazing!” “We love you!” or “Hooray for Jesus!”

But it doesn’t. In Hebrew, the term means something far less cheerful. It means, “Save us. Save us now!” As in, “Lord, help us! We are desperate! We are in trouble!” Our cries are steeped in need and want. “Hosanna, Jesus,” we call out. Save us. Save us now.

If you resonate with this paradoxical feeling, this authentic hope wrapped up in honest fear, it is okay. This Gospel is for you. As Debie Thomas writes, “If the Palm Sunday story is about *anything*, it is about dazzling hopes and disappointed expectations. It’s a story about what happens when the God we want and think we know doesn’t show up, and another God—a less efficient, less aggressive, far less muscular God—shows up instead, and saves us in ways we didn’t think were possible.”ⁱⁱ

Scripture reveals that Jesus knew what was to come. Maybe not the details of how it would come about, but he knew what these days must hold. From the moment he shared his messianic



identity with his disciples, he prophesied this fate (Mark 8:31). He’s even prophesied it would come in Jerusalem (Mark 10:33-34). Not that Jesus’ mission is to die, but rather Jesus knows that his “unbridled attempt at human wholeness has proven too disruptive and offensive for those wielding power.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus can only love wide open, and toning down God’s healing love is not an option for the Messiah.

Sister Helen Prejean is a Catholic nun who has accompanied countless death row inmates on their journeys to the end. She shares that from the moment of their conviction, these inmates imagine their deaths a million different times. They think about it when they’re awake, they dream about it when they’re asleep. For her, it is cruel and unusual. Even on the final day—they’re reminded of how many hours left. How many minutes. Until the very last. It’s like a million tiny deaths.

I wonder if this is what it was like for Jesus, knowing his days were numbered.

In v11, we get a small window into his thoughts. Mark says (in v11), “Then he [Jesus] entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” “When he had looked around at everything.” If you blink, you might miss it. But that verb, “he looked,” is the same Greek verb used earlier in Mark (3:5) when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. He asked, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” and then “he looked” around at the Pharisees and Herodians. In that moment they decided to conspire against him, to destroy him. Jesus knew what was on their hardened hearts then. He looked—not an innocent look, but certainly a knowing look. One look at them, and he knew. Here in Mark 11, Jesus entered the temple, looked around at everything, and he knew. Triumph to disappointment.

The crowds cry out:

Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ *Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

For Mark, the meaning of the term Christ denotes royalty. The Greek term is a translation of the Hebrew term for Messiah—“anointed one.” Kings were anointed. Jerusalem is a royal city. And it was King David who made Jerusalem the capital of the kingdom. His own son, King Solomon, built the first temple in Jerusalem. The Old Testament consistently calls Jerusalem the “city of David,” connecting the city with God’s king (Psalms 2:6; 48:2; 149:2). For those Jews at the East Gate of the city, it was not hard to envision a royal Messiah, ruling from Jerusalem. It was their dream.

With all this in mind, we can imagine how some must have experienced Jesus’ “triumphal” entry as the fulfillment of prophecy and one more step toward establishing him in the ancient city of kings. The disciples already know he is the Messiah (Mark 8:29-30) and have been anticipating



future greatness alongside him (Mark 9:33; 10:35-37). The crowds have seen and heard him perform countless marvelous acts under the banner of God's "kingdom."^{iv}

No wonder, then, that the bystanders welcome him not only with the standard pilgrimage refrain from Psalm 118:26 ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!") but with a decidedly royal line, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!"

They must have wondered quietly, or maybe not so quietly, as he rode by, "Is this the king? How will God establish him on the throne?"

We know, of course, this is not the normal power-hungry, sword-wielding, army-raising kind of king. This one rides in on a colt, not a warhorse.

On the other side of town, Pilate is entering Jerusalem from the west in a parade all his own. Pilate doesn't live in Jerusalem, you see, he travels this way this time each year. Passover is a Jewish festival which celebrates when God set God's people free from the empire. And every year during Passover, the city would swell from 50,000 people to around 200,000. Rome doesn't want these occupied civilians to get any ideas. So, Pilate travels in from his coastal residence in Caesarea with his legions of armed soldiers and guards to remind the Jewish city of kings just who their ruler is.

The religious leaders will use this to their advantage, of course. The festival would prove the perfect cover. In a matter of days, they will arrest Jesus at night. Try him at night. Hand him over to Pilate, and have him crucified by brunch. Most of the city would have missed the nocturnal events, and the hope those Jewish peasants may have felt on Palm Sunday would be dashed by Friday morning.

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?

Jesus had come into the city defenseless and weaponless, riding on a donkey. He all but cried aloud that his rule would have nothing to recommend it but love, humility, suffering, and sacrifice.

The paradox of this day—this week—is not lost on us. God on a donkey. Dying to live. A suffering king. *Good Friday.*

These paradoxes are precisely what give Jesus' story its shape, its weight. We are called to hold together truths that are incompatible and counterintuitive. What may seem foolish to the rest of the world is not foolish in God's kingdom.

The Go-Fund Me for Chinese grandmother Xiao Zhen Xie—the elderly woman who was attacked by a white man while waiting at a cross walk in San Francisco—has raised over \$983,000 as of this morning. That fund was established for her care, but she has turned around and donated every dime to the Asian American and Pacific Islanders community.

Despair and hope. Frederick Buechner writes, "Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take...."^v



Here we are: Holy Week.

In the end, may we find solace in this truth: we are known and held by a God who is too big to fall into the world's expectations. We follow the way of the one who loved us so much, he entered into the weight of our messy world. And we are understood by a God who knows all the reasons we cry out "Hosanna!" "Save us!"

Blessed is the one who comes to die that we might live.

ⁱ Debie Thomas, "Save Us, We Pray" (Mar 21, 2021), www.journeywithjesus.net.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Ira Brent Driggers, "Commentary on Mark 11:1-11" (for Mar 28, 2021), www.workingpreacher.org.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Frederick Buechner, "Things that Make for Peace" (blog post from Mar 14, 2016, www.frederickbuechner.com).

