

A Tale of Two Parades

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Mark 11:1-11

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.

## TWO PROCESSIONS

There were two processions that entered Jerusalem this day. One entered from the east. And one entered from the west.

The procession that entered from the east was led by a man named Jesus. He rode a colt, a young donkey down the Mount of Olives.

He was cheered by weary pilgrims who had traveled many miles to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. They treated him like royalty as they laid down their coats and green branches in his path.

The procession that entered from the west was led by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate rode a war horse and was surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth.

No one cheered. They just got out of the way.

The contrast between the two processions was profound. The Romans came asserting the power of the empire. They wanted people to know that Caesar was Lord, and they were willing to make their point with a sword if need be.

On the other hand Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. In a way it was almost a parody of the Roman procession. Jesus in humility rides a young donkey with his feet almost touching the ground.

And the people who went before and after him were not armed at all. Instead they sang psalms or what we would call hymns: "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!"

One procession glorified the weapons of war.  
The other procession glorified the Prince of Peace.

We know how the story ends.

We know that King Jesus rides toward a cross. The Empire will strike back at this king who rides on a donkey.

But, for one brief moment our eyes are opened, and we get a glimpse of something different, something greater. We see a world in which power is displayed in humility. We see a world in which even the lowly pilgrim sings with joy.

## TO FETCH A DONKEY

Mark's gospel gives us quite a bit of detail about the preparation for this procession.

The Bible tells us that Jesus sent two disciples to fetch a donkey. He tells them exactly where to go and what to say. In other words Jesus had this all planned out.

We don't know which two disciples he sent, but I would like to speculate at this point. I think Jesus sent James and John.

You remember James and John, a.k.a., the Sons of Thunder. They thought the procession of God's kingdom would be like Pilate's procession, a parade led by a Messiah riding a war horse.

In fact James and John were so blind to the true nature of the kingdom that they said to Jesus (when they thought that the other disciples weren't listening), "Allow us to sit on your right hand and your left in glory." In other words they wanted to be chief of staff and secretary of state in the new administration.

The other disciples got mad when they heard about this; not because they thought it was wrong but because they didn't think of it first!

Mark tells us that all the disciples had spent time arguing about who was the greatest and who would get the top jobs when the kingdom came in military glory.

They couldn't hear what Jesus had to say about a cross and the cost of discipleship. They had ears, but they couldn't hear.

So, what better way to teach James and John about the true meaning of the kingdom? On the day that Jesus will be welcomed into Jerusalem with joyous hosannas, Jesus sends the "Sons of Thunder" out to rustle up a donkey.

Looking ever so much like horse thieves they have to explain to suspicious onlookers that their Master needs this untamed and balky animal.

Can't you just see these proud disciples trying to get that stubborn young donkey to the Mount of Olives?

I can just hear them saying in frustration,

“And we left a good fishing business for this?”

## FETCHING DONKEYS TODAY

Following Jesus is never the glorious undertaking that we think it will be.

I remember the vows I took when I became a pastor. They asked things like,

“Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors and work for the reconciliation of the world? ... Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence and imagination?”

I eagerly said “yes” to all those vows.  
I felt the wind of God's Spirit blowing at my back.  
I stood tall and sure.

And then a few weeks later I learned that serving the people with energy, intelligence and imagination meant things like:  
ordering bulletin covers,  
changing light bulbs in the restroom,  
making a last minute run to the bakery because “someone” forgot to buy the elements for the Lord's Supper.

I wanted to be the Lord's right hand man.  
And what happened?  
I found myself on donkey patrol.

The parade into Jerusalem was not what the disciples expected. And often following Jesus is not what we expect either.

I think that the true meaning of what we do is often hidden from us. We are preparing the way of the Lord, but sometimes those preparations are not so glamorous.

Discipleship at times is like fetching donkeys who don't want to be fetched.

And yet, we see in this story that the kingdom of God can come through those routine, seemingly mundane tasks.

The same is true today.

In a heated and very unproductive meeting someone who speaks a quiet word of peace can make all the difference. A visit to one who is alone can change everything. A word of encouragement to a confused and lonely person can make a lifetime of difference.

But, most of the time you won't see it when it happens. Most of the time it'll feel like you're on a wild donkey hunt.

In order for us to really see Jesus will have to open our eyes.

## OPENING OUR EYES

Jesus' parade into Jerusalem seemed pretty tame compared to the pomp and circumstance of Caesar's troops.

But, in Mark's story we (the readers) know the truth from the very beginning. Appearances can be deceiving. The one who rides on a donkey is the Messiah, the Son of God.

And in the triumphal entry, Jesus reveals his true identity to the crowds.

Just as Jesus opened the eyes of a blind man named Bartimaeus before he entered the city, so Jesus will open the eyes of his people in the days to come.

They will learn that a suffering servant is the most powerful servant of all. They will learn that even a cross and a tomb is no match for the power of God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

You can't blame the crowds and the disciples for misunderstanding Jesus. After all we know the whole story and yet we are often act as if we are as blind to the truth as those who first made their way into Jerusalem.

We still lead the cheers for Jesus, but sometimes we act as if we have no clue about the kingdom that he brings.

We still act like Jesus comes as a military warlord instead of a prince of peace.

We still think that the Messiah comes to promote the glory of one nation instead of the salvation of the world.

We still are reluctant to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us. We still refuse to take up our cross and follow Jesus in the way of self-denial.

It's not enough to cheer for Jesus and sing "hosanna."

We must learn to follow Jesus all the way into Jerusalem.

This is important.

We do not lead Jesus into Jerusalem.

We follow Jesus into Jerusalem.

It is Jesus who teaches us what we need to know.

## AN EMPTY CITY

Mark's account of the triumphal entry has a curious ending compared to the other gospels. The cheers of the crowd seem to fade away as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Jesus looks around at everything, but it's late so Jesus and his disciples leave Jerusalem and go back to Bethany for the night.

The King of kings comes to the Holy City, but there was no one to greet him. In Mark's gospel the bustling city is portrayed as empty.

At this point, the cheerful notes of Palm Sunday now strike a distinctly minor chord. It is dark and quiet in Jerusalem.

Jesus will be back the next day to confront the buyers and the sellers in the temple. He will challenge the authority of the religious leaders. And most importantly Jesus will even challenge the importance of the temple.

He tells his disciples who are admiring the beautiful stones of the temple and its surrounding courts, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

In Mark's gospel this is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. When Jesus is put on trial, these words will be used as a reason to crucify him.

And yet in the long run those words will prove to be prophetic. In 70 AD the temple will be totally destroyed by the Romans and God's people will be scattered to the four winds.

### A WORD FOR THE EARLY CHURCH

Mark's gospel was written to help Jewish Christians who had been a part of this tragic diaspora, this unholy scattering of God's people. How could they find hope in such a time of such tremendous upheaval?

They would find hope by remembering that the Son of God did not come into Jerusalem as a warrior king. He came into Jerusalem as the prince of peace. He did not come into Jerusalem to prop up the political and religious powers of the day. He came to challenge them.

According to Jesus, the fall of Jerusalem did not mark the end for God's people. It marked the beginning. Jesus said that there would come a time when the people would not worship God in a certain place but in a certain way ... in spirit and in truth.

The people cried, "Hosanna!" as Jesus came into Jerusalem. It was an expression of praise that means literally, "God save us."

No doubt those who first read Mark's gospel were shouting the same thing in a time of dislocation and despair.

Their world had changed drastically. The temple was gone. And the people were shouting, "God save us."

The story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem reminded those early Christians that sometimes God's salvation comes in ways that are unexpected. In a world seemingly ruled by proud nations flexing their military might, the king-

dom of God still comes in the humble Messiah who rides on the back of a young donkey.

## RIDING INTO A VIOLENT WORLD

The entry into Jerusalem was a fulfillment of prophecy. (Zechariah 9:9) Jesus was making the bold claim that he was the Messiah. But, Jesus would be a different kind of Messiah.

In the ministry of Jesus we learn that God weeps for us and desires to gather us under His protective wings. (Luke 13:34) And so God comes to us. He rides right into the middle of our messy and violent world.

Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. He could have stayed away. In fact his disciples urged him to stay away.

But, Jesus chose to ride toward Jerusalem. He didn't go through the back door. He went through the front door with banners waving and horns blaring.

He let everyone know that he was the Messiah.

The secret that was so well hidden in Mark's gospel is now out. God's Son does not stand aloof from the pain and suffering of the world. God's Son rides right into the middle of it.

Those early Christians faced great persecution, but the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem reminded them that they did not face it alone. And this was enough to give them great faith and courage in the days ahead.

We have the gospel message today because those who first read the gospel of Mark believed. They believed that the Son of God could indeed ride into town on the back of a humble donkey and deliver a hope that was stronger than any parade Caesar and his warriors could muster.

## JOINING JESUS TODAY

I wonder what the story of Palm Sunday means for us today?



One thing is sure. We still cry hosanna. We still ask God to save us. We are still threatened by the evil that comes in many forms.

And this story reminds us that the salvation of God comes to us in a way that is unexpected and mysterious.

God does not come save us from our worst fears. Instead, God enables us to live in a fearful world with courage and a hope that is eternal.

The Old Testament background for our lesson comes from the prophet Zechariah (9:9). Shockingly this passage tells us that the victorious king is also a humble king. That's why he rides on a donkey.

But, what follows is even more telling.

The prophet described the future Messiah in this way,

“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

The prophet makes it crystal clear. Jesus rides into Jerusalem as the Prince of Peace, and that is still his mission.

Today is Palm Sunday. Today we join the parade into Jerusalem. We follow a Savior who rides humbly on a donkey. We follow the Prince of Peace.

We do not worry about those who enter with spears and swords on the other side of the city. We will not run from those who threaten us. We will not confront violence and evil with a powerful military display of our own.

Instead we travel with Jesus. We confront violence and evil with the love and forgiveness of God, that love magnificently revealed in the Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

I know. They crucify people who do that.

But, we also know that this is not the end of the story.

In Luke's gospel two relatively unknown disciples scurry out of town after the crucifixion. On the road they meet the risen Christ whom they don't recognize.

They say to this incognito Savior, "We had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel. But, it didn't work out that way."

Nothing squelches hopes for triumph and power like a crucifixion. No one ever said they were looking for a crucified Messiah.

The hopes of these disciples were so crushed that they couldn't even see the Savior who walked beside them.

But, when they gather around the table as they had gathered around the table on that fateful Thursday before the crucifixion, their eyes were opened. And they knew the truth. They recognized him.

Violence and fear will not have the last word.  
God will have the last word.

And people of faith still believe that one day all the crosses of this world will be transformed into symbols of salvation. One day we will all march into the New Jerusalem. Every tear will be wiped away, and night will be banished forever.

But, until that day this day we once again follow Jesus into Jerusalem. Through the eyes of faith we see the glory that will come.

We shout, "Hosanna."  
"Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

Amen.