

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

Psalm 118

Mark 11

A More Complicated Jesus
The Reverend Jay Sanderford

One of the lines I've heard repeatedly over the past few weeks is, "There's light at the end of the tunnel!" I hear my neighbors saying it when we go out to walk our dogs. I hear it in the hardware store in Dexter, in grocery stores, on the news. My email is flooded with various pundits trying to predict the future AFTER the crisis ends. After months of Covid-induced fear and isolation, we're finally glimpsing hope as the vaccines roll out, the everyday death numbers decline, and the restrictions on our social lives ease up. All of this is *wonderful*.

The other line I've heard, however, is this: "I can't bear any more." As in: "I can't bear another Covid-19 variant." "I can't deal with another round of shut-downs." "I can't bear being separated from my family any longer." "I can't bear another vaccine delay." "I can't bear another political scandal." "I can't bear another mass shooting." And then we struggle to get vaccinated, and we are devastated by the horrid reality of two mass shootings within one week.

As ever, our lives glide from hope to disappointment, distress to optimism. On the one hand, the light at the end of the tunnel revives us. On the other hand, it shows us just how dismal the tunnel has been. In other words, it doesn't take us human beings long to go from praise to pain.

What a fitting context for Palm Sunday, our entry into Holy Week. Today, we begin a journey that holds within it the fullness of our human story -- the highs, the lows, the dreams, the fear, the complexities. In the span of seven days, we do it all: we praise, wave palms, process, break bread, wash feet, make promises, break promises, deny, betray, condemn, abandon, grieve, despair, disbelieve, and celebrate. This holy week, we see the light at the end of the tunnel, lose our vision of it completely in the shadow of death, and then find it again, saturated in splendor.¹

¹ I am grateful for insights shared in Journey with Jesus, "Save Us, We Prey," March 21, 2021, Debie Thomasn, published by Dan Clendenin.

Frederick Buechner observes this about Palm Sunday: “Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take — despair at what in our madness we are bringing down on our own heads and hope in him who travels the road with us and for us and who is the only one of us all who is not mad.”² Buechner is right: we are wild with despair and hope, both, so much so that we don’t know what to do with the story of a God who comes to die so that we can live.

So, on Palm Sunday, it is good to have a story that complicates our understanding of Jesus, lest we bland him down to a dull, uninspiring and entirely non-threatening figure. We know that Jesus has a wide emotional range: on a number of occasions in the Gospel stories he “rebukes” the disciples or Pharisees or pushy groupies. And the traders in the temple provoke Jesus to a real anger when they set up a “shopping mall” in the worship space. Today, following on the heels of two horrific mass shootings in our land, it is we who benefit from the presence of a God who is unafraid to accompany us into the complex and messy issues of our communities and lives with a beguiling love.

It’s been a while since I marched in a parade, but when I was a Boy Scout, it was a regular occurrence. In addition to the countless campouts, wilderness treks and service projects that were on our busy Scout calendar, we marched in community parades all across the northern suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. One morning when I was about 12, our BSA Troop 7 lined up to march in a parade with the usual compliment of marching bands, tractors, shiny convertibles, clown cars from the Shriners, a retinue of local politicians and floats from local businesses. At the back of the parade, in the most prominent position, was the white Cadillac sporting the senior senator from the state of Georgia, Richard Russell. It was quite the political spectacle.

As a child who spent a good bit of time in the church, I have vivid Palm Sunday parade memories of clomping around the sanctuary waving my palms with extraordinary zeal. When I was a pastor in Florida, my colleagues hacked enormous branches from the palm trees beautifying the campus and filled the sanctuary with the fresh greens. On the borrowed animal, Jesus was always the affable, donkey-riding savior who would offend no one.

According to Mark’s gospel, when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem, the heart of Jewish worship and the seat of Roman authority, he seems strangely baffled about how to pull off his entrance. There is no magnificent war horse to carry the victorious ruler to prominence, no big white luxury convertible. In its place is a young unbroken colt, not a symbol of dominance.

Jesus seems to have little appreciation of the rank that comes with traveling on Air Force One. And with no experience as an event planner, he has no inkling about how to stage a grand entrance. After all the bother about

² Buechner, Frederick, “Things that Make for Peace.” A Room Called remember, (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1984), p. 78.

acquiring the right animal, just the kind of action worthy of a king, he gets the wrong animal. He chooses a beast of burden, not a weapon of war; a tractor, not a tank.³

The crowd possesses a better sense about how the pageantry of a parade introducing a king should unfold. “Save us now,” the throng cries. “Hosanna,” they shout, referring to Jesus “the coming one,” the one who returns the kingdom of David to its glory. But somehow it works, for despite riding the wrong animal, he is surrounded by followers full of passionate hopes. He is moving toward Jerusalem with authority. He enters the city: this is the key moment. He approaches the temple: this is it-- the climax. He gazes all around the holy space, takes stock of the whole situation, and ... goes back to the hotel. Walks back up the hill to Bethany. What a disappointment. How can we make sense of it all?

The search for the colt gives us our clue: “you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden.” For Mark, the decisive moment has to do with finding the unbroken colt. For Matthew, what was new and transcendent was the miraculous conception of Jesus. Luke has Mary, the mother of a very human, very divine God at its core. For John, the word birthed in the person of Jesus had long been en-fleshed in God. In Mark, Jesus made his decisive pilgrimage into the city riding an unbroken colt as a sign of incarnate nature.

Countless generals had marched into conflict on a stallion and others would continue. Some would take on the powers of their day by violence and lose their lives, perhaps magnificently, and be remembered as heroes. Others would align with the authorities of the day, lacking the resolve to hold out for the rebuilding of the royal kingdom. But only Jesus challenged the authorities with enthralling love, only he rode to certain death with no attempt to intimidate, destroy or surprise his enemies. In this moment Jesus fulfills one prophecy while disrupting others. He changes the notion of kingship by riding on a colt rather than a horse. And he makes a short journey from the land where his authority is recognized and his priestly power to heal and forgive is formidable, to the city where the people will reject him and his disciples will betray him.

Yet even in all the spectacle and pageantry of Palm Sunday, we can't forget where this processional is headed. Psalm 118 that Pat and Renee read prepares us for today's Palm Sunday paradox. The very stone that the builders rejected has become our cornerstone, our foundation. What we think is going to be true is not going to be true. The admiring throng quickly becomes the taunting mob. Jesus is not installed on a royal throne as a national hero but nailed to a cross. The one who came into Jerusalem one day in the name of the Lord was too dangerous to associate with the next morning. It was all well and good when he was spending his days healing

³ Wells, Samuel. Palm Sunday: Mark 11: 1-11, Christian Century, April 5, 2000.

the sick and teaching in parables, but when his presence and message became a threat to the powers that be, the dynamics shifted and his closest disciples deserted him.

It appears important for all of us to watch out for all our assumptions about God and salvation: God and salvation may show up riding on an unbroken colt. Neither God nor salvation is interested in praise or kings or power. God and salvation will choose a kind of death on behalf of seeking a new kind of life.

And while many people of faith may like to imagine ourselves among the Palm Sunday crowd, we prefer to excuse ourselves from that company come Good Friday. It's one thing to be part of the praise chorus. It's another thing entirely to identify with the people who called for blood.

There is an irony in the telling of this story: Jesus and the reader/hearer of the story know something that the other characters in the story do not seem to know. We know its end. We know that when he enters Jerusalem this time it will be his last time; this is the road to his death. Three times previously in this Gospel Jesus tried to tell his disciples that his destiny is to suffer grievously—to be rejected, delivered into the hands of his enemies condemned to death and yet to rise again. But even his closest followers had not ears to hear—not about Jesus' future nor their own.

If we go back to the beginning of this day, this story of Palm Sunday in Mark opens with the description of a very odd search for a donkey. On a public and glorious day when Jesus will be welcomed into the capital city, Jerusalem, with joyous hosannas and waving palms, why are his disciples dispatched on a mission to locate a colt for Jesus to ride into the city? Why do the disciples look suspiciously more like horse thieves trying to wrangle a willful creature into obedient service? Is it because from the beginning in Mark, finding the donkey is the act of humility and service that will come to define Jesus' ministry?

Jesus the rider is the center of attention. The unique lowliness of God is on full display here as Jesus the Christ. Here is a peaceful, powerful and beguiling dignity demonstrated by Jesus when the whole city is crying out for a grand actor. A hidden majesty is coming to the forefront. A grand sort of holy humility is on public display, one where the real dignity and power is the quiet humbleness of Jesus, not the crowds or the hosannas.

After we have, as a nation, suffered again the pain of our peculiar American tragedy, two mass shootings in a week's time, Palm Sunday reminds us all that even the brokenness of the world cannot destroy God's holy love come to us in very direct, human form. Here, on the eve of Holy Week, we are met again by an unrestrained holy God coming to us in our midst, lamenting, protesting such a horrific loss of human life. Again. In these painful, disorienting days, we follow a God who notices the pain and violent disorder of this world, and goes there with equal measures of justice and peace.

Some words in a poem by the British Somali writer Warsan Shire speak to me in this moment. Perhaps they will to you, too:

What they did yesterday afternoon

Warsan Shire

they set my aunts house on fire
i cried the way women on tv do
folding at the middle
like a five pound note.
i called the boy who use to love me

tried to 'okay' my voice
i said hello
he said warsan, what's wrong,
 what's happened?
i've been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;

dear god
i come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.

later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered

where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere⁴

⁴ Shire, Wasan, "What They Did Yesterday Afternoon," Collected in Her Blue Body (flap pamphlet series, Flipped Eye, 2015). "What They Did Yesterday Afternoon" was shared widely across blogs and social media in the aftermath of the Paris attacks in 2015.

If there's a single day in the church year that illustrates the dissonance at the heart of our faith, it's Palm Sunday. More than any other day, this festive, ominous, and complicated day of palm fronds and hosanna banners warns us that paradoxes we might not like or even want are woven right into the fabric of Christianity. God on a donkey. Dying to live. A suffering king. *Good Friday*.

These paradoxes are what give Jesus's story its shape, weight, and texture, calling us at every moment to hold together truths that seem bizarre, counterintuitive, and irreconcilable. On good days, I understand that these paradoxes are precisely what grant my faith its credibility. If I live in a world that's full of pain, mystery, and contradiction, then I need a faith vigorous enough to bear the weight of that messy world. I need a religion that empowers me, in Richard's Rohr's beautiful words, "to live in exquisite, terrible humility before reality."⁵ But the question is: will I choose the humble and the real?

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⁵ Rohr, Richard, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House, 2016).