

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
March 24, 2024  
Mark 11:1-11  
John 12:2-16  
Palm Sunday

### **“The Almighty Dollar”**

Palm Sunday always presents a conundrum for the preacher and the musician. Do we focus on the palms and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, or do we focus on the passion – the crucifixion. What will it be?

Today we’re going for palms except for the story you just heard me read from John. I wanted to include this story – something I’ve never done before – because it mentions Judas and how he sold out Jesus for just a few bucks to save his own skin. What struck me this year more than other years, is how much he stands in stark contrast to Mary, who spends a year’s worth of wages to purchase the nard she uses to anoint Jesus for his death.

That struck me this year.

I think it’s important to note that she and other women were the only ones left at the end. They who bank rolled his ministry and stood by him at every step of the way but are rarely mentioned let alone by name, were the ones with him at the cross after the 12 had deserted him. Let this stand as a reminder to us of the importance of women in this story and the risk and commitment and courage one needs to follow Jesus.

Because this is what Palm Sunday boils down to, and this is the invitation it issues: will we join Jesus’ movement, and his procession, or will we stick with Herod and Pilate? This is the central conflict of Holy Week and what led to Jesus’s crucifixion. Which one will it be? He asks us to choose, to make the right choice, even if it is difficult.

There were two processions that entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday: Jesus's and Pilate's.

Every year during Passover the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. He would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. They could commemorate their victory against Egypt if they wanted to, but real, present-day resistance (if anyone even dared to consider it) was futile, because Rome was watching.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe Pontius Pilate's imperial procession like this: "(It was) A visual (display) panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

According to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome; he was the Son of God. So for the empire's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession was both a potent military threat and the embodiment of a rival theology. Armed heresy on horseback.

That Jesus planned a counter-procession is clear from Mark's account of the event. Jesus knew he was going to enter the city on the back of a donkey; he had already made arrangements to secure one. So as Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, and the explicitly vulnerable.

Crossan notes that Jesus rode "the most unthreatening, most un-military mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her." And what do the people cry out as Jesus passes by? "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!"

Translation: Save us, Jesus! (Hosanna means save us.)

If one didn't know better, we might say Jesus's entry looked like a planned political demonstration.

Well . . . in many ways it was that. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Jerusalem was the central sacred geography of the Jewish people. It's where they believed the new David, the son of David, would rule a restored kingdom. And at the center of it all was the Temple – the glorious temple -- that consumed more than 4000 acres. It was the place where God dwelled; the “navel of the earth”.

To be in the temple was to be in the presence of God.

But Jerusalem had also acquired a negative reputation. The government had grown corrupt, and the high priest and temple authorities were obligated to be loyal to Rome and make sure the annual tax was paid. They also had to maintain peace and order and serve as mediaries between the local government and the imperial one.

It was a difficult balancing act, where they needed to collaborate just enough to keep Rome happy, but not so much as to anger their Jewish subjects. Perhaps this is why one commentator calls Mark “a wartime gospel.”

It's into this powder keg that Jesus purposefully comes embodying an alternative. And those who knew him and had been keeping up with his whereabouts the past 3 years, knew Jesus embodied an alternative vision. They had witnessed him:

- healing people without regard for who they were or what day it was;
- welcoming little children;
- eating with outcasts;
- respecting women and foreigners;
- and proclaiming and symbolizing God's kingdom of peace and justice.

Those who had been watching and listening to him saw him as love in the flesh and the embodiment of hope.

On this Palm Sunday, can we dare to see the same and follow him all the way to the cross? Will we have the courage to see this day as hope rising, or will human sin prevail?

It's easy to give up. After all, if Jesus is love in the flesh and the embodiment of hope, why is the world in such an awful, over heated mess? Do you know what I heard the other day? I heard that babies in Gaza are so hungry that they are too weak to cry. Friends, the stakes are too high to give up on God.

We must join Jesus's subversive counter-cultural movement, knowing – believing – trusting – that it is the only thing that will save us. And I don't mean save us as in we all get to heaven. I mean save us from ourselves. Save us from the place we seem to be going where goodness appears to be defeated, and our oneness as a human community is gone.

Friends, this difficult story is meant to indict and challenge. It's meant to move us ethically from faith into action. And if we can accept the risk we can become better people. Because it's not just any movement; it's Jesus's movement, and it has the power to change the world.

For me, today – in 2024, the most important question we must answer is whether we'll join his movement, because everything hangs on how we answer that question. As I think about the hateful words and vulgar language that we now see as normal; or the divisive rhetoric and the acts of violence that are excused away; or the stoking of fear; or the sidelining of women; the dehumanizing of foreigners . . . for me, today, the invitation to join Jesus' subversive movement is of the utmost importance. But he calls us not just to any subversion, or to subversion for its own sake, or to some partisan political agenda. Rather, Christian subversion takes as its model Jesus himself.

Palm Sunday is the start of Holy Week and begins a story of tragedy and triumph that should inspire, provoke, and challenge us. We will hear this week about his disciples, his friends, his companions who have been with him since those early days; the ones who watched him heal the sick, feed the multitudes, and proclaim the good news. And we will see them betray him, deny him, run away from him, and mock him.

But these stories are not only about Judas, Peter, and the others; they are our stories, too. Will we stand firm or run?

Jesus entered the city as he did on purpose for the sake of the people. He didn't have to go; he could have chosen a different path.

But he didn't. And that teaches us something about the life of faith. It teaches us that living faithfully means living in the world. Living faithfully means leaving the security and comfort of our homes and risking radical involvement with the world.

Jesus calls us out of our complacency. He calls us to care deeply, to live passionately, to show love to everyone, to share our resources, and to work for causes that matter to him.

“Save us”, the people cry. Save us, we cry. Save us, O God, from the continuation of violence both far away and right here. Save us, O God, from notions of religious liberty that enshrine discrimination of any kind and ignores your command to “love your neighbor.” Save us, O God, from thinking our way is the only way. Save us from resignation that thinks this is how it will always be. Hosanna, save us.

And Jesus saves in the most subversive, counter-cultural way. By going all the way to the cross, by dying, by giving himself wholly, totally and completely, Jesus saves. By loving without reservation, Jesus saves. By choosing to use his power not for himself or his own glory, but for the sake of the people, Jesus saves. Even when he knew that his vocation would cost him his life, he set his face "like flint" towards Jerusalem. Even when he knew who'd get the last laugh at Calvary, he mounted a donkey and took Rome for a ride.

Are we willing to follow? Or will we give up on God?

Because this is what Palm Sunday boils down to, and this is the invitation it issues: will we join Jesus' movement and his procession, or will we stick with Herod and Pilate? Which one will it be? He asks us to choose, to make the right choice, even if it is difficult.

Last week, I came across a Franciscan blessing that is a beautiful but challenging prayer that seems to sum up this day so well. I share it with you:

"May God bless us with discomfort — discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger — anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears — tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with foolishness — enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done."

Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two symbolic journeys into Jerusalem. Stallion or donkey? Parade or protest? Which will you choose? Sometimes (I'll be honest), I'd rather just wave a palm branch, sing a few rounds of "Hosanna," and go home. The actual praise and worship Jesus invites us to declare on this Palm Sunday is far riskier; his donkey ride cost him everything. So let us dare not join Palm Sunday's parade too casually.

Amen.

Sources:

Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week, Amy-Jill Levine

Tim Hart-Anderson, "The Humiliation of God", preached April 2, 2023

[www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net) for their essays on Palm Sunday from Debbie Thomas and Dan Clendenin

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Cross, The Last Week