

Journey into Holy Week – Mark 11:1-11 – March 25, 2018

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We have reached the culminating days of the Season of Lent. Palm Sunday is here, in case you slept through the first part of the service. And this is the beginning of Holy Week. These past 40 days we have been on a journey, traveling alongside Jesus in a time of self-examination and introspection. A time of spiritual spring-cleaning within our lives. It's been a long journey so far, but things are about to get a bit chaotic.

For many folks, this week is Spring Break. People have made plans to travel, visit friends and relatives, maybe take a few, short day trips. Others will stay home and catch up on all the little errands that need to get done. Maybe file their taxes.

Holy week is a week full of journeys. The gospel lesson from this morning tells us of a trip Jesus took with his disciples from the town of Bethany, near the Mt of Olives, to Jerusalem, and then from there back to Bethany. Then throughout Holy week the journey continues. Back and forth from where they were staying in the town Bethany to Jerusalem. Then finally there's the journey to the Garden of Gethsemane, which leads to the courtyard of the high priest, then to the governor's palace, and then to the hill called Golgotha. From there the journey leads to a tomb. Each of these mini-journeys during the week gets more difficult and takes us down a path that draws us deeper into the darkness. Betrayal, torture, crucifixion, death and burial – they call out to us. Holy week takes us through the intensity of these journeys.

And maybe that is why some people simply choose to avoid Holy Week. Come to church on Palm Sunday, shout a few Hosannas and fervently wave some palm branches. Then come back next Sunday for the celebration of resurrection on Easter. Everyone wants the happy ending. The betrayal, the humiliation, the blood and the death are messy. Let's just skip all the drama and get on with the celebration. But do you see? It's hard to understand resurrection without knowing what comes before it. Without the story of the passion, the story of resurrection is rather pointless.

Today's journey on this Palm Sunday begins on a road outside Jerusalem. Each of the four gospels tells this story, and each offers a somewhat different perspective. Taking insights from the four gospels, our Palm Sunday traditions have formed. It is John alone who identifies the branches as being from palm trees. Mark's presentation of the story is more subdued than the other three gospels. In his, the procession stops outside the city of Jerusalem, and Jesus enters the Temple alone. And once there, he simply looks around. He's taking everything in, considering what comes next, and then he leaves to find lodging for the evening. The parade ends rather abruptly and without much hoopla.

Our story begins on a dusty road. Jesus, and the disciples, and a group of fellow pilgrims are traveling to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. In Mark's gospel we don't get to hear much commentary in the story. We only hear the instructions Jesus gives to a pair of his disciples, to run ahead to the next village, where they'll find a colt tied near the entrance. They're told to untie him and bring him to Jesus. If anyone asks, they are to say that it's for the Lord, and he will be returned immediately. And when the disciples arrived, sure enough, the young beast was tied right where Jesus said he would be. So the disciples untied the young beast and led him out of the village. Did Jesus plan this ahead of time? It seems likely.

The young colt of course had no say in the matter and simply followed along. On the road back, I imagine the men talked about Jesus. They spoke highly of him. And with the Passover Festival about to begin, they could feel themselves getting caught up in the excitement. Perhaps they wondered why Jesus wanted the donkey. Was something about to happen? Maybe things were going to change around here, now that Jesus was on the scene. The Roman occupation was getting tiresome. Maybe he was about to make a move. The men brought the colt to Jesus, and some of the people with him took off their cloaks, and layered them on the donkey's backside.

The beast had never been ridden before and the extra weight from the cloaks probably felt very strange to him. Then suddenly things got a lot stranger. The man Jesus mounted the donkey, and the beast froze in place. It was a rather bizarre turn of events, not that the donkey could understand such things. Generally the chore of transporting passengers was a job best left to horses. However, there were some historical instances of young donkeys being ridden by great kings. A king would sometimes take a donkey, one that had never been previously ridden, as his steed during times of great peace. Though any unknowing bystander would take one look at Jesus and scoff at the notion of him being a king.

Yet the symbolism of Jesus riding a donkey was not lost on the people who were gathered around. Those who had been traveling with Jesus, who had heard his teachings, who had engaged in the whispered speculations that perhaps he was the one to overthrow Rome, began to react to this odd spectacle. As Jesus rode the donkey toward Jerusalem, the small crowd surrounding him began to cheer and sing. They were waving their arms and laughing and dancing with one another. Others brought branches and began tossing them into the path in front of him, making a soft cushion on the hard, dusty road.

They shouted, "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." The word Hosanna means "save us." The people of Israel were looking for salvation. They were expecting the revival of David's kingdom. They wanted freedom from their Roman oppressors. They had listened to Jesus' message and witnessed what he could do, and they

assumed that David had finally come back – come back to rescue them and restore his kingdom. Come back to save them. Yet, indeed while riding a donkey signaled that the rider might be a king, the message of the donkey was one of peace, not upheaval. Who ever heard of a peaceful protest making a difference? And so they cried out, “Hosanna, save us!”

Perhaps by using the words – Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – gospel writer Mark is foreshadowing what is to come. This phrase comes from Psalm 118 that Mary read for us. This is an oft-quoted phrase from this psalm. But the more recognizable phrase from this psalm is “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Maybe Mark is trying to warn us that the adulation of the crowd may soon turn to rejection. And in fact, that is what we shall witness later this week. From cries of hosanna - save us, to cries of rejection - crucify him. How quickly the mood of the fickle crowd will change.

And almost as quickly as it had begun, the impromptu parade was over. As they drew closer to Jerusalem, the shouts began to quiet and the people got lost in their own thoughts. There was absolutely no commotion as they entered into the city. Jesus was strangely quiet throughout the journey, eyes focused on a point somewhere off on the horizon.

After a while, Jesus finally carefully dismounted. He patted the young donkey on the neck in gratitude. The people carefully removed their cloaks from the donkey’s back, and Jesus instructed the pair of disciples to lead the colt back to his village. The sky was darkening. It was growing late. Without a word, Jesus walked up the steps into the Temple and simply took a long look at everything that was going on. Perhaps contemplating what was to come next. As it was late, he led his disciples out of the city and back to Bethany. He would be back tomorrow, no longer quiet, ready to overturn a few tables and toss out a few moneychangers.

Throughout Holy Week we will observe many people who are first drawn to Jesus, but then will resist him, try to change him, seek to avoid the consequences of being with him, or even condemn him. Those crowds who cheered him on his way this morning will soon be screaming for his death – “save us” becomes “crucify him.” Religious folks plot to kill him. Most of his closest companions run away in order to save their own skins. They couldn’t handle how the story was ending. Even brash Peter will only shamefully deny him.

As Jesus hung on the cross, the peoples’ dreams of rebellion against Rome died with him. The journey of the peaceful parade from the Sunday before, ended in defeat. But we know that isn’t the end of the story.

As I contemplate the actions of Jesus, as he made the deliberate choice of how he would enter the city of Jerusalem at Passover, I cannot help but think of yesterday’s march. Hundreds of thousands of young people gathered in parades around the world – some small,

some large – but sharing a single message of peace. A desire to live without fear of gun violence in their schools and in their neighborhoods. Led by the determination of a group of high school students from Florida, the survivors of the most recent mass school shooting, these kids have dared to stand up for what they believe in and have garnered the support of other kids and adults who are tired of the slaughter of innocent lives, all while riding the metaphoric donkey of peace.

While the issues surrounding their dream of peace may indeed be complex, their voices are being heard. They have a dream of peace. Not unlike many other types of dreamers around the world who long for an end to violence and hatred and abuse and oppression. When we can begin to identify the darkneses of this world, and name them for what they are, then the light of hope may begin to dawn.

So let us enter this week that is called Holy. Let us together walk the horrifying paths of this last week of Jesus' life, leaving behind our comfort zones, our contentment with things as they are. Let us dare to enter into the darkness of evil and death, willing to walk alongside Jesus as he journeys to the tomb. For it is only when we are willing to name the darkness that we see all around us, can we ever hope to begin to know the incredible power of Resurrection.