

My best wishes for a meaningful Holy Week.

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4/8/2006

Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

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.

CHEERS AND JEERS

The great tennis star of years gone by, Bill Tilden once said, "You're never as good as they say you are when you're winning, and you're never as bad as they say you are when you're losing."

That's true.

Sports teach us that the crowd is fickle. One day they can make you into the hero, and the next day they make you into the goat. The difference between cheers and jeers is a very fine line. And if you don't give the crowd what they want, they will "crucify you".

And that's our lesson for today.

Today Jesus is the hero. The crowds are shouting, "Hosanna." They are ready to anoint him as their king. But, we know what is coming. Next week they'll be shouting, "Crucify him." Next week they will call him a blasphemer, a terrorist who should die.

How can this be? How can the crowds go from "hosanna" to "crucify" in such a short period of time?

THE MESSIAH THEY WANTED AND THE MESSIAH WHO CAME

I think it's because the Messiah who came was not the Messiah they wanted.

Jesus did not live up to their expectations.

Jesus didn't come to bring them victory and a national championship. Jesus didn't come to lead a military revolt. His kingdom was (as he put it) not of this world. The kingdom that Jesus brought into Jerusalem that day was misunderstood by almost everyone.

This theme of misunderstanding is prominent in the gospel of Mark. From the very beginning the religious leaders misunderstand and condemn Jesus. They think he is claiming too much authority, that his claims are ... well, sacrilegious.

Jesus' own disciples also misunderstand the nature of the kingdom. They want a kingdom marked by political power and earthly glory. But, Jesus brings a kingdom marked by spiritual power and heavenly glory. It's a disappointment, and often they express their displeasure.

And when Jesus talks to his disciples about suffering and death and a resurrection, it's as if he is speaking a foreign language.

You can't blame them for misunderstanding. In a way, it was a foreign language. The kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ was unique. It was a whole new way of thinking about what God was doing in the world.

There are still those who cheer for Jesus but have no clue about the kingdom that he brings.

There are still those who think that Jesus will come as a military warlord instead of the prince of peace. There are still those who think that Jesus comes to promote the glory of one nation rather than the salvation of a whole world. There are still those who have a hard time with the idea that personal sacrifice and forgiveness are at the heart of the Christian message.

It's not enough to shout hosanna. There must be substance to our faith. We do not lead Jesus into Jerusalem. We follow Jesus into Jerusalem. It is Jesus who shows us what it really means to be a king, and it is Jesus who shows us what it means to be his disciple.

A RIDE FIT FOR A KING

What does today's lesson teach us about this real Jesus, the Jesus who is still hard for us to accept and trust?

First, it teaches us that Jesus is indeed a king. And Jesus' mode of transportation is indicative of the kind of king he would be. All of the details in the story are important.

Jesus told two of his disciples, "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." Mark 11:2

Obviously Jesus had made arrangements ahead of time to have a particular kind of transportation into Jerusalem, a "colt that had never been ridden." Now usually we say that this is a symbol of Jesus' humility. We say, "See how Jesus enters Jerusalem, not on a war horse but on a lowly donkey."

And that is part of the story, but it's not the whole story. The choice of animal was not only a way of illustrating the humility of Christ but also a way of illustrating his royalty as well.

When kings would ride into town in times of peace, they would sometimes ride on a donkey. It was a sign of peace. According to Scripture, an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must not be one that has been put to ordinary use. So, since this animal had never been ridden, it was appropriate for the sacred task it was to perform, namely, bearing the Prince of Peace as he rode into Jerusalem.

The king was coming, and Jesus was the king. But, he was a king who came to bring a different kind of kingdom. His kingdom would be a kingdom marked by compassion, righteousness and forgiveness.

THE KING IS COMING

The people understood the symbolism of this ride into Jerusalem. They were quite excited. The king was coming.

The Scripture tells us that many people spread their cloaks on the road in front of him, a symbol of profound respect. Others cut leafy branches in the field and spread them before him. This was reminiscent of what was done for kings and military leaders in Israel's recent history.

And as this procession made its way into town the people began to sing one of the Psalms. One group sang "Hosanna!" And another group would sing responsively, "Hosanna in the highest!"

And then the song that the pilgrims normally sang on their way into Jerusalem took on greater significance when they would respond, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Could it be that their hope for a Messiah was fulfilled that day? Was Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God? Was Jesus the one who came in the name of the Lord?

THE TRIUMPH FIZZLES

But, in Mark's gospel the story seems to have a curious ending. The triumphal entry does not seem so triumphant any more. The cheers of the crowd fade away as darkness falls. Their hopes just seem to fizzle.

Mark tells us that Jesus looks around at everything, but it's late. So, he goes home to Bethany. The King of kings came to the holy city, Jerusalem, but there was no one to greet him.

In this scene, the enthusiastic crowd is nowhere to be found. And as Jesus looks around at the empty temple, perhaps he is thinking about the emptiness of the people's hearts.

He was not surprised that Jerusalem was an empty place. He knew that everyone would soon abandon him. He knew that their cheers would soon turn to jeers. He knew that he would soon be murdered by the very people he came to save.

Suddenly the cheerful songs of Palm Sunday strike a mournful, minor chord, and darkness falls.

THE AMERICAN JESUS

I think that the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is symbolic of how Jesus rides into our lives today. Jesus rides on a donkey; he is a king who brings peace, and a savior who invites us to sacrifice for the sake of forgiveness.

It is still not what we want or expect. No matter how many times we hear the story we want to hear something else, something that is easier to accept.

One commentator wrote that the typical American paradigm of the Messiah is not Jesus, but Superman. We don't want a savior who does a crazy thing like rising from the dead. We want a savior who does a smart thing like not getting killed in the first place.

And sometimes our theology and our worship practices are changed to fit what we want. We too sing hosanna, but Jesus sadly knows that our words are often empty expressions of our own desires.

I saw a special on TV this past week about those churches that emphasize the second coming of Christ. By taking certain Scriptures out of context and

ignoring other passages completely, these groups have been able to totally rewrite the message of the Bible to fit their view of the end times.

In their version of the “gospel,” God is on their side, but not on everyone’s side. They think that judgment time is coming soon. Fortunately, God will take them out of this world of woe in what they call the rapture, but those that are “left behind” will be tortured by the reign of an anti-Christ and his minions.

According to this group, the Jesus of the second coming will be different from the Jesus we learn about in the gospels. He will come bringing a reign of destruction upon his enemies. And the enemy is often defined as those nations who happen to be in conflict with the United States at the time.

This brand of theology is very popular, and the churches who proclaim it are growing. As one commentator said that the liberal Protestant minister who is preaching about the need for social justice doesn’t have a chance going up against the drama of a preacher who is claiming that the world will end next Wednesday.

Strangely enough it’s what people want to hear.

In fact people are so in love with this kind of preaching and presentation of Jesus that even when it’s obvious that the prophet has gotten it wrong, they are willing to allow him to adjust his timetable. For example, there was a man named Hal Lindsey who wrote a book entitled the *Late Great Planet Earth*. When I was in high school he suggested that Anwar Sadat was the anti-Christ and the world was going to end in 1988.

It didn’t quite happen that way. So, he wrote a revised version of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the book is still popular! People just love a Jesus who comes to lower the boom on their enemies. It will never go out of vogue.

But, we need to remember that even if there are large crowds shouting the name of Jesus, this does not necessarily mean that we have a large group of disciples. That was true when Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem, and that is still true today. The cheers can still quickly turn into jeers when Jesus is

revealed to be the Messiah that does not necessarily sanction everything we want.

THE JUDGMENT OF KING JESUS

I still believe in the Savior who was known as the Prince of Peace. I still believe in the Savior who came into the world to save the world, including those who were his enemies. I still believe in the Savior who was willing to die on a cross rather than resort to violence as a way to bring in his kingdom. And I believe when the final trumpet sounds and Jesus comes again, it will be that same Jesus who judges the world with compassion.

The crowd wanted Jesus to be their king, but Jesus knew it wouldn't work. The crowd cheered him as king, and he was a king. But, he wasn't their kind of king. In the week that follows that will become painfully clear.

In a way it's easy to see why the crowd turned on Jesus. They welcomed him into Jerusalem as a king. They rolled out the red carpet for Jesus. And what did he do? He criticized them and their most sacred institutions.

In just one week Jesus managed to completely alienate everyone. He alienated the crowds, the political authorities, the religious leaders, and even his own disciples.

When Jesus finally did enter Jerusalem to stay a while, he disrupted the Temple practice by driving out those who sold sacrifices and the money changers. In his conversations with the authorities, Jesus challenged their authority.

The parable of the wicked tenants (12:1-12) openly threatens the inhabitants of Jerusalem. He accused the Sadducees of ignorance of both the scriptures and God's power (12:18-27). Finally, he predicted the destruction of the Temple itself. (13:2).

Jesus came to Jerusalem to tell the truth, and the truth hurt. It's amazing that he lasted a week. Heaven help the Messiah who boldly criticizes the powers that be. Heaven help the Messiah who boldly criticizes us!

But, that's exactly what Jesus does even today. Jesus does not come into our lives to tell us that all is well. Jesus comes to challenge us and our way of life. Jesus comes to tell us that we too must take up a cross and follow him. And none of us ... none of us ... are exempt from his judgment.

Jesus loves us too much to let us continue on the road to destruction. He calls us daily to deny ourselves and our ways so that we can embrace his way. (Mark 8:34)

MOVING

This these next few weeks will be a time of transition for my family. When we decided to sell our house and move closer to Carrollyn's job, we had one condition. We didn't want the closing to take place during Holy Week.

Well, you know what happened. We closed on our house this past Friday, and we anticipate closing on our new house tomorrow! The best laid plans oft go astray.

I didn't realize that I had so much invested in my house. But, I do. Over the past 11 years Carrollyn and I have personally made quite a few improvements. We've put down tile here, added molding. You name it, and we've done it.

Now that we've finally sold the house, in some ways we don't want to leave. We've invested too much of ourselves in that place.

Don't misunderstand. The house that we're moving to is a great house, but we're not there yet. And we still have a hard time thinking of ourselves in a totally new place.

One day soon we will turn in our keys to the old house and live in our new house. But, until we do that, until we leave the old home, we will not be able to appreciate the new home.

Whenever I move, I think about Abraham. God called him to load up his whole family and move.

But, Abraham didn't have a house waiting in a nearby town. God just told him to load up the U Haul and go to the place that He would show him.

And so Abraham did as he was told, and for his actions he is referred to in the New Testament as the epitome of a person of faith. He had the faith to go where God told him to go ... even though it didn't seem to make much sense at the time.

It seems to me that moving might be a good example of what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus.

We have to turn in the keys to the old way of life in order to receive the keys to a new way of life. We have to deny some things in order to embrace something better.

It's painful to give up the old way of life and embrace the new. We humans are nest builders. We often want to stay in one place.

But, God in Christ loves us too much for that. He calls us to once again follow him into Jerusalem and then on to Golgotha, where the cheers will turn to jeers.

It is a hard journey to take, this way that leads to a cross. But, it is the journey that will finally lead us to a new home.

I don't know. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Holy Week is a good week to move.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN