

## Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

### Mark 11:1-11

I love a parade.

I'm not sure I love a parade, but they are interesting. Parades begin with the color guard and everyone standing as the US flag goes by, indicating something important is happening. Firetrucks follow, along with businesses with advertising, the mayor on a 69 Ford Mustang convertible, other politicians running for office, clubs, the Shriners zooming around in their little go carts, various floats, a high school band or two no longer wearing full wool uniforms with hats but matching T-shirts and shorts. And at the end it kind of fizzles out, and you kind of feel sorry for that last entry because everyone is picking up their chairs and blankets to go home.

And today is our day for a parade, but what kind of parade. And Palm Sunday – today?

I can just hear it. What are Pastor Ben and Pastor Fred doing now? Don't they know that Palm Sunday is the Sunday before Easter? Well, yes we do, maybe better than anyone else since we have been preaching and leading worship on this story for a total of – between us, 40+ (8, 32) years. But why? Why is Palm Sunday the week before Easter and not some other day? Why the tradition? Does anyone know why? Other than we've always done it that way? The answer – Because according to at least one gospel account, the triumphal entry happens exactly one week before Easter, so the church fathers who put together the church calendar designated the Sunday before Easter as Palm Sunday. Now later, other church fathers who saw how few people were attending Good Friday services because it was no longer a holiday in society, decided to rename the Sunday before Easter Palm/Passion Sunday, adding the story of Jesus crucifixion to Palm Sunday, so that the people in the pew (that's you) who don't attend Good Friday service (that's not all of you) will hear the story of the Jesus death before they celebrate the resurrection. The two do go together and Luther would say they must go together. But having both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday together makes it almost totally unmanageable, because you have two giant theological themes on the same day.

And besides all of that, if you read the gospels, especially the gospel of Mark, you come to realize that he has huge sections of Jesus teachings happening during this last week. Mark 11 – 15 make up one third of the gospel. By trying to fit the gospel of Mark in an arbitrarily designed church calendar, we do violence to the message Mark is trying to proclaim.

Look what the traditional lectionary did: Transfiguration Sunday, then for Lent 1 you jump all the way back to the beginning with the temptation story, then forward to the story before the Transfiguration. This isn't the only time we have not followed the lectionary in the hymnal. We've been reading Mark's gospel in the order he wrote it, that has led to some interesting church year twists. We did have a Transfiguration Sunday on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday just like everyone else following the traditional lectionary, but we included the story of Jesus first passion prediction because it comes immediately before the transfiguration story, but if you follow the lectionary, that passion prediction would have been read last Sunday, the second Sunday of Lent, because the church fathers thought it fit better in Lent. The first Sunday in Lent was always the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days which happens at the very beginning of Jesus ministry, not just before the end, the 40 day reference being enough to put it at the beginning of Lent. So we flip flopped all over Mark's gospel to

tell the church father's church year story, but that is not Mark's story, and I believe Mark was inspired. The church father's with their church year story? Not so much.

Because all this flip-flopping does violence to Mark's message. When I went to seminary, Mark was the writer most scholars felt was uneducated and put together his gospel in slap stick fashion. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Mark is a master story teller, an inspired story teller, a Holy Spirit inspired story teller, and he puts together the stories with great care, because each story informs the stories around it. We saw how last week the disciples were completely clueless about the ramifications of Jesus ministry and his suffering and death. They were blind to what he was doing, but a blind man who simply cries out, "Master, I want to see," can see. The very next story is the story we have today, Jesus entry into Jerusalem, and that same blind man story challenges us with the question, "Can you see what is going on?" Or will you, like the disciples, remain in the dark about who Jesus is and what that means for our understanding of God. The disciples were arguing about who is the greatest in the kingdom, and today Jesus comes as king, proclaimed King David's son, but what kind of king? A king like David or some other kind of king.

Mark lives at the cross. For half of the gospel book, Jesus rushes around doing the God-like things: healing, feeding, raising the dead, giving sight to the blind, but starting in chapter 8, things slow down. Jesus starts talking about Jerusalem and what is going to happen there. Today he arrives in Jerusalem, and the people hail him as king, son of David. But what marks this story is the pomp and circumstance we don't see. We do see Jesus riding a donkey, people with palm branches, cheering crowds on the sidelines, but where are the conquered slaves to lead the procession, followed by banners and soldiers telling stories of how the hero has defeated the enemies, then chariots, and finally the hero dressed in full military regalia on a powerful stallion. Now that's a parade worthy of a king. Come on, Mark. If you want to impress us with Jesus' kingly credentials, highlight some details that are worthy of a king.

Hovering over this story are the words that hover over this last third of Mark's story, "I'm going to Jerusalem and there I will suffer and die, and three days later rise again. If you want to follow me, take up your cross and follow me. It shall not be so among you. If you want to lead, you must become a servant." Mark lives at the cross, because he understands that it is the serving, dying Jesus who gives true life.

The people who Mark was preaching to needed to hear that word because the early church was a church in crisis. There were so many questions. Was Jesus coming back, but when? Soon? Later? Jesus rose from the dead, defeating death, but why are we suffering? Why is there persecution? What kind of God leaves us alone in our suffering? Was Jesus really the Son of God if he died? What kind of God is it that dies on a cross? Did he really rise?

Mark is preaching to a people who know suffering, and he wants to let them know that God is present, most present in the suffering. That doesn't make the suffering good. In fact, Jesus' death is about as ugly as it gets, God became a part of this world and the ugliness in it. That is where we will find God and the strength, comfort, that transforms the suffering, the peace that goes beyond understanding.

Mark is a real gospel, not a pie in the sky gospel. Jesus confronts the power behind the power, where evil lurks. Jesus' victory is worthy of a parade, a parade that exemplifies humble service.