

We have arrived at the gates of Jerusalem. We have journeyed, together, through the Season of Lent, and have now come to Palm Sunday, to usher in Holy Week.

Today's story is one of the few that is described in all four Gospels. In Christendom throughout the world we tend to celebrate a composite story of Jesus' arrival. This is not unlike how we often meld Luke and Matthew's stories of Jesus' birth, or how we remember and place together Jesus' seven last words from the cross on Good Friday. In the Palm Sunday accounts, Matthew includes children, for example; only John actually refers to **palm** branches. All the writers, except Mark, describe the journey as going into the streets of the city. Today's text from Mark seems to describe the procession as concluding at the city gates. When Jesus actually enters Jerusalem, he goes directly to the temple, not yet to drive out the money changers or to anger the chief priests and scribes. No, for this trip to the temple, Jesus was quiet, perhaps contemplative, most likely alone since it was late. He just looked around at everything.

You may recall, when we started our year together with the Gospel of Mark, I said to you that in this Gospel, Mark lets us, the readers, inside, as if we're sitting right next to the narrator. We know this because the very first verse in Mark tells us so: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We're in the know, unlike the disciples who we continue to watch bumble around a bit. We know what's going to happen this week, even if those in the story do not. We know that those shouting "Hosanna" today will be shouting "crucify him" by Friday. We know this, but they don't.

Throughout the ten chapters before today's text, we've been introduced to John the Baptist, the kingdom has been announced, disciples have been called, miracles have been performed, parables told... But did even his closest friends understand? I heard described that the closest point in these first ten chapters was when Peter realized that Jesus was the Messiah, but did he know what was in store for this coming week? It's as if the disciples had gained sight, but did not yet see clearly. [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 153]

I find it interesting that, at least in Mark's account, Jesus' actual procession and entry into the city only took a few verses to tell, but the preparation of securing the colt, and other arrangements took up most of the story. It seems to me that Jesus had planned this day very carefully. He carefully orchestrated what, Markan scholar, Ched Myers, called "a piece of 'street theater.'" [Binding the Strong man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, p.294] Perhaps this long description of securing the right animal, etc, was simply to fulfill the prophecy from Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Though, unlike Matthew, Mark doesn't directly quote Zechariah, but he would certainly know the prophecy, so would his readers.

These verses on preparation and strategy are a parody on kingship. Victorious kings after battle would arrive into town riding on majestic horses. The Messiah for whom they wait will do the same, in their expectations. This triumphal entry, of sorts, begins at the Mount of Olives, again, to fulfill prophecy, "the traditional location from which people expected the final battle for Jerusalem's liberation would begin." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 155]. When Jesus calls out for necessary provisions, instead of being flanked with weapons, He simply requests a colt, not even a full grown donkey, but a young donkey, one that's never been ridden. I imagine it's even possible that Jesus' feet could have dragged along the ground while perched on that colt. So, this is how the battle of Jerusalem will be won? Nevertheless, the people greet the procession by spreading their cloaks and branches on Jesus' path, with loud shouts of Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Save us! We can imagine ourselves in the crowd, can't we?, welcoming Jesus and asking for him to save us. It will be harder to imagine ourselves in that same crowd on Friday, shouting, "Crucify him." The political leaders and religious leaders

of the day, must have been, at the very least, befuddled by this spectacle; but they were more likely fuming! What was Jesus communicating to those in power? It seems like Jesus was offering a new way to victory, an alternative to the empire's way of domination. Jesus arrives at the city gates with a new authority, with a new plan, displaying humility and vulnerability. And Jesus invites the people to live a new way in the world.

Whatever may have been going on in the minds of the crowd or the minds of the disciples that first Palm Sunday, the reader knows that something significant will happen.

Mark's account of the festivities of that day seem to fizzle out at the end, unlike in Matthew where we read how Jesus threw the town in turmoil; in Luke and John there were run-ins with some Pharisees. In Mark, it was late; Jesus makes a quick stop at the temple, then leaves to stay at Bethany for the night.

But wonder with me. I'm struck by this brief stop at the temple. Mark tells us "Jesus looked around at everything." I don't know how many times Mark referred to Jesus looking around, or his outward gaze, but there are some notable ones – a rich man comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus, looking at him, loved him and told him to give all that he had to the poor, that his treasure would be in heaven. Perhaps most notable for me, though is at Jesus baptism, "Just as he was coming up from the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." Fast forward to the cross when the heavens are torn apart again, these two events framing his ministry, as he breaths his last. [Presbyterian Outlook, lectionary blog]

So what does all of this mean? I suppose my most truthful answer is, "I'm not sure." But what we do know is that the story isn't finished. Jesus didn't sneak into Jerusalem. He was very calculating and specific as to how he wanted to be seen, not as a military hero, like his ancestor, King David, but with humility, as someone who would identify with the poor and lowly, like his mother did when she found out she was carrying the Christ child. The people will very soon discover who Jesus is and what he's coming to proclaim and who he's coming to save.

I know how easy it is to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter morning. I'm going to borrow what Pastor Paul said to us every Holy Week – resist that temptation to jump over Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to head right into the empty tomb. Join us for all the Holy Week services as we journey together to the cross and then to the empty tomb. We'll just put a bookmark right here and pick up where we left off on Thursday night to celebrate and remember Jesus' last night with his friends in the upper room and in the garden. We will live stream that service at 7PM. Good Friday's service will be recorded like this service and will be ready for you to view midday Good Friday service, which may actually be more in keeping with your family tradition of a mid-day service. And then we will meet on Sunday at the empty tomb with Good News.

In the meantime I hope you have a thoughtful and meaningful Holy Week. I invite you to look around you and to gaze heavenward, mindful of why Jesus entered Jerusalem, and how he may be calling you to respond. Amen.