

“Do You Really Mean It?”
Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021
Mark 11:1-11
Chris Keating

For the second year in a row, there are no crowds this Palm Sunday, no children waving palm branches, or little boys jabbing each other with palm branches. There are no loud shouts of “Hosanna!” Thankfully, there is also no donkey here in the sanctuary—we’ll save that for another time as well.

We lack all of those trappings—the crowds, the cheering, the waving, and blessedly even the donkey – working with animals is notoriously unpredictable, not to mention messy.

This is not how we have planned our Palm Sunday and Easter celebrations, but if the pandemic has taught us anything it is flexibility. Indeed, the church has learned that sometimes we are like that long hamstring muscle – it requires stretching and flexibility to stay in shape.

Indeed, there is a sense that in removing those peripheral details and special effects we may actually grow closer to understanding the events of Holy Week. Instead of focusing on palm branches and street theater we see what really matters: Jesus, riding a young colt, entering Jerusalem, offering himself in obedience to God, fully aware of what is about to happen. Perhaps we may even begin to understand what was on the mind of Christ, who as Paul reminds us, “did not equate equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, and being born in human likeness, humbled himself, obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross...”

Each of the Gospels remind us of the crowds shouting their acclamations: “He saves! Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” The whole event, the gospels remind us, stirs up the crowd, with people asking themselves, “Who is this?”

But only Mark adds what seems to be a strange little, socially distanced detail. After the processions and falderol have ended, Mark describes Jesus entering the temple and looking around at everything prior to leaving Jerusalem to go back to the disciples who were staying in Bethany.

The shouts of the crowd have faded, and as Jesus walks around the temple, we wonder if he is thinking to himself, “You shouted “Hosanna.” You welcomed me as your Savior. But do you really mean it?”

Mark has famously showed us Jesus walking from place to place. He came to the disciples and said, “Follow me!” He reminded the disciples of God’s provision in the miracle of the loaves and

fishes, and called women and men to walk with him as he taught and healed. The eyes of the blind were opened, those possessed of demons were healed, and they followed Jesus in all that he taught and showed them.

Even into the capital city, teeming with tourists and crowded by Passover visitors. They have followed him into this hotbed of contention. And as Jesus walks around the temple precincts, it is not hard imagining that he might have muttered, “But do you really mean it when you say you’ll follow me?”

This question demands our attention. It is especially relevant to us on this Holy Week. We enter this Holy week not only coping with the realities of Covid 19 and all that has meant, but also at a time when we feel especially vulnerable: we have faced a tough year; many of our friends have struggled, and continue to struggle, and our separation from them makes this so much harder. We come with our own wounded experiences of grief and suffering, and we also come following the shootings in Atlanta and Boulder. The storms of our lives and of our world continue to blow around us this Holy Week, stripping away the layers of our familiar Easter and Holy Week traditions. And it is here that we must ask ourselves this question which surely was on Jesus’ mind: Do we really mean it when we say we’ll follow Jesus?

We miss the point of Palm Sunday if it has become nothing more than a silly parade, a story of jumping up and down, waving our palm branches ecstatically, shouting our “Hosannas” without seeing this as a prelude to Christ’s passion. He comes, as Isaiah reminds us:

*He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering^[a] and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces^[b]
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

There’s a hint of parody and satire in Mark’s account as he contrasts Jesus’ arrival with the grand entrance of Pilate that would have been taking place at the same time on the other side of the city. Jesus would have also known that just at the moment when the city would have been stretched to capacity, the Roman Governor would parade into town—making the trek from his palace in Caesarea into Jerusalem, entering Jerusalem from the west. He’d come, not out of religious obligation, but as a show of force. As the representative of Caesar, Pilate came to maintain order and to quell resistance in the crowds.

Jesus knew this. He knew that as Pilate would approach, he’d come from the west with a full complement of Roman soldiers. Pilate’s approach would have followed an exacting procedure. Platoons of well-drilled soldiers would march ahead of him as a sign of military might. Pilate himself would have been riding an elegant stallion, armed not only with armor but with the inescapable and deadly truth that Roman rule was to be followed without exception. His approach sends the unmistakable reminder that Caesar alone is god that Rome is the savior of

the people, lord of all. Pilate, as the physical incarnation of Roman rule, the sure and undeniable sign that might makes right, and that Rome was large and in charge.

Jesus would have known this, and he offers his own entrance as a reminder of what obedience really means.

As Pilate entered, the crowds would have stood as still as stones, motionless, expressionless, the percussive sounds of Caesar's legions and horses beating within their silent bodies. Obedience was demanded, extracted with the ever-present threat of torture and execution. Obedience was expected upon the threat of death.

In contrast, Jesus arrives with a minimal entourage, a rag-tag group of followers—men and women whom he had called to follow him, and those who had been healed. While Roman ceremonies were a display of power and prestige, Jesus' arrival is different. He comes as a king, yes, but not the sort of royal figure whose power is exuded through threats and domination. Jesus comes as a king, but he is not hiding behind veils of status and privilege, nor is he upholding institutions that enslave or dominate others. He comes to set God's people free.

He comes in obedience, offering himself as a model of how disciples are to offer themselves in love and service. His is a triumphant, joyous entrance, filled with the shouts of those who yearned for God's presence.

But when it is all said and done, I imagine him wandering around the temple, thinking of the sacrifices that have been offered, the shouts of the crowd still in his ears, wondering, "Do they really mean it?" He is the *good shepherd*, writes Peter Bynum, precious because he was the one who bears the scars and pain faced by the sheep, the shepherd willing to offer himself.

Thousands of years following Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, our shouts may be quieter, our cries anointing him king subdued, but the key question remains: Do we mean it when we say we will be his followers?

It is that question that prompted this little church to respond to the needs of our community by summoning volunteers and loading up thousands of diapers and feminine hygiene products for low income mothers and babies in our community this week.

It is that question that sends volunteers like members from our church into the places where Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is at work, using the gifts of our hands and the gifts of those who have donated to One Great Hour of Sharing.

And it is that question which prompts us to know the promise of which Jim sang today: God's eye is upon the sparrow, and I know God watches me."

"I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way," Mark told us at the beginning of the Gospel. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." This was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.