

The path we follow
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 Palm Passion Sunday

Mark 11: 1 – 11

Then they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 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. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“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!”

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.

Mark, in his account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, switches things up. Does things differently than what we’ve gotten used to. Mark is usually the gospel who sticks to the point. Who leave off superfluous details. Where ten words will do he uses five. But here, in these eleven verses, we get lots of detail. And so, we pay attention to those details.¹

The first thing Mark does is locate us in the story. Geographically, we’re in Bethphage and Bethany. Bethany, the town of Mary and Lazarus and Simon. Places where Jesus travels and eats with friends. His head is anointed with expensive perfume, there is weeping when his friend dies and one of Jesus’ dearest friends proclaims he is the son of God. Bethany is where there is radical love shared and deep relationships built. What do we know about Bethphage? Nothing. That, too, is worth noticing. My friend and colleague Becca Messman

¹ This sermon has relied on:

<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2024-03-17T07:00:00-07:00&max-results=1>

<https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/palmb/#Mark11%3A1-11>

And the major themes from a paper written by the Rev. Rebecca Gillespie Messman for the lectionary study group known as The Well for our 2015 meeting in Chicago, Illinois.

says "I wonder about the stories we don't know from Bethphage: simple stories of Jesus knowing about someone's newborn horse, and powerful untold stories about his mentioning a coming day when he might need to borrow it. They were Gospels that didn't make it onto papyrus."

That's where we are geographically.

Theologically, we are square in the words of the prophet Zechariah whose words echo throughout these verses. The kind who will come triumphantly on a colt. The Mount of Olives where God will stand and mete out justice. ²

How does Mark fill these large geographic and theological locations?

With instructions and tasks.

He tells the disciples he will need a colt. He tells them where to find one. What to say when they find it. The Lord needs it. Is he referring to himself or something that is pre-arranged?

It happens just as Jesus says it will, finding the colt, being questioned, and being granted the colt with the promise it will be returned/

Cloaks are then placed on the colt, and it's less a parade than a procession, with people before and behind shouting the words we have come to associate with this day, "Hosanna," most literally translates as "save us."

This is not a victory lap. It is a glimpse of the hoped for liberation. If, as Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan, and others are correct, Jesus' procession is in direct opposition to Pilate's

² Zechariah 9:9

⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
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.

Zechariah 14:1-4

Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward.

entry into Jerusalem, then these are brave souls indeed to show up and shout what they do, for the consequences of that are severe, as we will see in just a few days.³

When he arrives, Jesus goes to the temple. In other gospels, likely written later, Jesus clears the temple, turns over the tables, but here, seeing that people have left, Jesus does too. Nothing happens here, and yet Mark tells us about it, and that the twelve disciples are with him each step of the way.

It is, almost as if, the details of these verses are pointing us to the disciples, to what is being asked of them. Disciples who left their boats and followed a man who promised a new life, a new world they did not understand. And who, here, asked them to do things like get a colt and put some cloaks on it. Walk into town, and then walk back out again.

I will make you fishers of men, Jesus promised them. But what are these things? Gathering, collecting, accompanying. Not nearly as glamorous. Are these the “Other duties as assigned” that are in the fine print?

Markan scholar Joel Marcus notes, “the preparation of the Lord’s way is according to Mark in a rather prosaic manner understood as the arrangements people make for the ministry of Jesus.”⁴

Again, Becca Messman:

“The arrangements people make for the ministry of Jesus. I cannot think of a better way to describe what we are called to do as Christians. We make arrangements for the ministry that Christ is doing, but we have to realize that in the end, it is not about us. We are just on

³ Borg and Crossan, The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem, New York: Harper One, 2009. page 2.

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated this day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. With its climax of Good Friday and Easter, it is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic of Mark’s gospel. Mark’s story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion.”

⁴ As quoted by Tom Long.

donkey detail, finding ways for the Prince of Peace to make his way through this fickle, impoverished, and parade filled world. Whether you utter a brave word in a committee meeting, set up a table so that a hungry person can have a healthy hot lunch, or price out vans for the youth mission trips, you are making arrangements for the ministry of Jesus.”⁵

This past spring, just a little over a year ago, First Presbyterian Church was asked to welcome a family. A refugee family from Colombia. (The story of how it unfolded was told recently in a series of blogs by Episcopal Migration Ministries – you can read it here: <https://episcopalmigrationministries.org/sponsorship-lessons-learned-new-bern/>) . The story of all that happened to welcome a family. The months of conversations before hand, and then the word that they were on their way, and then they were here.

It's a story of paper towels and sofas and dishes and casseroles.
Scheduling and transporting.
Library cards and school registration.
Learning language on both sides.
The power of small things like bananas and flowers at arrival.

The family still has needs as we begin to consider welcoming another family. Transportation in a city with less than optimal public transportation. Housing costs rising. And there were learnings. The family came from Colombia, not Guatemala as we first thought. The didn't want tortillas, they wanted croissants. And yes, they did want to go kayaking.

But it was all making arrangements for the ministry of Jesus, roll of paper towels and translating a city map.

Because these aren't refugees, they are Nubia and Denia, Sharon and Miguel. Children of God. Like Mike and Helen and Winnie and Vaughn and me and you.

In December in our Session House, Sharon shared these words:

As she said, “When the place where you grew up is no longer yours,” fleeing and finding a new life can be exceedingly difficult. However, receiving a genuine and compassionate welcome from people in the place where you end up resettling can make all the difference to your ability to move on with your life, and to the richness of others' lives as well. ⁶

The Holy Week that is before us can seem daunting, there is so much road to travel and so many places to go. And walking alongside Jesus as he has walked alongside us can seem

⁵ This paragraph is a quote from the paper of the Rev. Rebecca Gillespie Messman for the Well Lectionary Study Group in 2015.

⁶ <https://episcopalmigrationministries.org/sponsorship-lessons-learned-new-bern/>

overwhelming. But what if we thought about our role as making arrangements for Jesus. To welcome. To care. To listen. Get the colt. Put on the blanket. Buy the bananas. Make the furniture fit in the room. Wash the dishes. Cube the communion bread and pour the juice. Cut the crusts off of the chicken salad sandwiches. Dig a space in the garden. Make sure nobody sits alone. Place a palm in the road. Again and again. Making arrangements for the ministry of Jesus.

It can seem small with the enormity of what is happening in the world. But what was happening in Jesus' time? It probably had more in common with today's headlines that we realize. And this is what Jesus had his disciples do to prepare for what is ahead.

Maybe, in the end that's how Hosanna happens. Maybe, that's how we learn to live into Holy Week, walking towards being Easter people. Maybe this is how we get to Jerusalem and the kingdom of God - by making arrangements for the ministry of Jesus and finding out that all the while God has been making arrangements within us, to become makers of peace and sharers of a radical welcome and so much more. Not ever less, and so much more. Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.