

“Excited – About What?”

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Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and 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. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹Then 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.

Not too long ago my family got a dog, named Nicky. He joined our much older dog, Ella, for a time in her later days. Many of you shared condolences when Ella died recently, and we are grateful. Nicky is my daughter Faith's dog, and she – and the rest of us – just adore him. Nicky is a very good-natured dog, full of joy and love. Faith, along with her sister Ana and brother Christopher, started something a few months ago. Out of the blue, they will stand around Nicky and start clapping and cheering. Nicky starts wagging his tail rapidly and jumps around a bit in joy. He is *so* excited, even though he doesn't know *why* he is supposed to be. His excitement is mixed with confusion.

This image came to mind when I thought about the excitement of the crowds at Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. The crowds were excited about Jesus, and they *should* be, but they didn't really know *why* they should be excited. Their excitement was a bit confused. It was for something that wasn't really going on.

Many of the people of Jesus' day expected the Messiah to be a take-charge kind of Savior. He was to come in power and physical might, as the one who would overthrow the Roman occupiers, once and for all. When Jesus came into Jerusalem on the day we now refer to as Palm Sunday, this is what was on the minds of many of the people. Author Brian McLaren retold the Palm Sunday story from that perspective. In his retelling, "Operation Sacred Vengeance" is the name of the rebel campaign. Jesus and his disciples have met secretly for days outside of Jerusalem, arranging where the horses and weapons will be stored, and planning for the crowds to create chaos in the streets, with the militia's strike soon to follow.

I'll pick up McLaren's retelling from there:

Jesus mounts a white horse. He is carrying a huge sword, but has it hidden in a palm branch. His disciples are similarly well-armed with swords, daggers, and shields, all camouflaged behind palm branches. They are mounted on warhorses, prepared for battle. The word goes out and the crowds assemble. In each man's right hand is a sword or dagger raised to the sky, concealed beneath a palm frond or coat. Each left hand is raised in a fist. Younger men and boys carry concealed torches, ready to light them, march on the city, and create mayhem when the battle begins

As they cross the brow of the hill near Bethany and the city comes into view, Jesus gives a rousing speech. "It is wrong for the heathen idolaters to have power over the faithful people of God!" he shouts. "That wrong must end today! We have suffered enough. Now we will make our persecutors suffer!" The people cheer and chant, "Victory! Victory! Crush the Romans! Kill the collaborators!"

"Who is with me in our holy cause?" Jesus asks. The crowds shout, "We are!" in a roar that echoes across the valley into the streets of Jerusalem. "Who is willing to fight to the death and avenge the blood of our ancestors?" Again the crowds shout, "We are!" ... Then the branches and coats are thrown to the ground and blades glisten in the sun. And so the battle for Jerusalem begins.¹

No, this is not the way that it went, though there was likely a parade similar to that going on that day. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan assert that while Jesus was making his way into the city from the east, Pontius Pilate would have been entering the city from the west, at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He came to Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish Passover observance when the city of around forty thousand people became a city of around two hundred thousand. With the Passover recollecting God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, Pilate brought Roman troops to ensure that the situation did not get out of hand, and to remind the pilgrims of the might of the Roman military, just in case they got any ideas.

Borg and Crossan describe the imperial procession this way: "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust."²

In contrast, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is on the back of a young donkey, borrowed from someone in the next village. This processional is included in all four gospels, in slightly different accounts. The event is clearly a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which reads "Rejoice 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." Mark doesn't specifically mention palm branches, calling them only "leafy branches;" the palm branches are

¹ <https://brianmclaren.net/palm-sunday-2011-end-of-violence/>

² Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, p. 3

included specifically only in John's account. The donkey (or colt), however, is included in all four accounts. This is not a minor detail. This is a tremendous contrast to the Roman imperial parade. Jesus did not ride into town on a mighty stallion, but on a young donkey. He did not come in a display of military strength, but in humility. He did not wear royal robes, but the clothes of the poor. He did not come as one who would conquer the Roman powers, but as one who would conquer our hearts. He did not come to reign just over Jerusalem, but over the whole world. He did not come to kill, but to be a sacrifice for us all. His weapons are not instruments of destruction, but instruments of peace. He came not to bring the Roman kind of "peace" – the *Pax Romana*, but the everlasting peace of God.

This parade of Jesus highlights for us the kind of king which Jesus came to be, the kind of king who upsets the status quo; the kind of king whom the powers of the present age cannot abide. For his processional entering into Jerusalem was opposing Pilate's processional. He would shortly afterward tell Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. It is a kingdom which we often oppose with our lives, while shouting praise with our lips. We say we want to be on the side of Jesus, but we often align ourselves with the powerful. We say we want the peace that Jesus came to bring, but we often cheer politicians and others who call for war. We say that we are on the side of Jesus with the marginalized, but we often shun those who are the outsiders. The people of Jesus' day did the same. The path that Jesus took was one that would unquestionably end in his death.

But not on this day. On this day, Jesus comes to town in what we call the Triumphal Entry. The people are excited about the coming of the King, arriving in Triumph. They are excited, but confused. They are shouting "Hosanna," which means "Save us." Jesus did come to save them, but not in the way they imagined. The people of Jesus' time wanted Jesus to take away their afflictions suffered living under Roman rule, but Jesus came to take away much greater afflictions than they could imagine.

Perhaps they should have seen the clues in the life of Jesus prior to this point. He did tell them to turn the other cheek and not to cast stones at another, unless *they* were without sin. He did tell them "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and "Blessed are the peacemakers." And then, there's that lowly donkey He was riding. He chose not the mighty stallion that would indicate military might, but the lowly donkey, indicating peace.

But the people did not understand these signs and so when they chanted praise to Jesus as He entered Jerusalem, they were cheering on a different kind of leader than Jesus came to be.

They cheered and greeted Jesus. And then, *nothing*, at least for the time being. The reading from Mark has such an anticlimactic ending. “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.” As PCUSA pastor Rev. Mark Davis wrote, “Worst. Movie. Ending. Ever.”

I wonder if the crowds began to turn on Jesus in this moment, as Jesus follows up the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem with a glance at the clock and heading out to Bethany with the disciples because it was late. *That’s it?!* We cheered and shouted for you to save us, and you’re just going to leave? Of course, there is much to follow in this Holy Week, but what follows is *not* what the crowds had in mind. Two thousand years later, we sit in the reality that while we *should* be excited about the coming King, our excitement too might be misplaced, wanting instead an imperial ruler of our own.

And so, as we gather for the parade today, waving our Palm Branches, let us say “Hosanna” – Lord Jesus, “save us.” Save us from our misconceptions and preconceived notions of who you are supposed to be, so that we may be attuned to who you truly are. Save us from our longing for power. Save us from mistrust of our neighbors. Save us from the hatred which leads to acts of violence – minor and major. Save us from racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ageism, ableism, religious hatred, xenophobia. As the hymn says, “Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore.” This Holy Week and always, save us, Jesus! Hosanna! “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Amen