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Mark 11: 1-11

### Two Parades, One Choice

If you had been a bystander on the east road into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday around year 30 of what we now call the Common Era, you would have seen a processional but probably not what you would call a parade. A lone rider on the back of a young donkey surrounded by peasant farmers waving tree branches or sticks or even their jackets and shouting "hosha' na", a Hebrew word which means "God save us", doesn't exactly make what would pass for a parade in our day and age, much less in first century Palestine.

If you had been on the other side of Jerusalem on that same day – at the west gate – you would have been witness to what did pass for a parade in those days...a military processional as the Roman Consulate, Pontius Pilate, entered Jerusalem for the High Holy Days of Passover. It was customary for the Roman authorities to make their presence unmistakably clear on such festivals for two reasons: First, the city of Jerusalem would often triple its size as peasants from the surrounding area came to the Temple and second, because of the increase in size and the number of peasants living in a pretty constant state of dissatisfaction with their economic situation, the chances for revolt went up exponentially during the emotional religious holidays – particularly Passover, the celebration of the exodus from Egypt.

The west gate parade was a sight to behold...legions of armored and well-trained troops marching in formation with shields, swords and spears in plain sight, the apparatus of the Roman war machine on full display as catapults and cavalry marched behind the garrisons of foot soldiers, the royal spectacle of the direct voice of Caesar in the Roman Consul with his entourage trailing behind him - laden with gold and silver and the fine fabrics of wealth...all of this might coupled with the imagery of the Roman Empire, the theology that was present in the images on the shields, the banners and the symbols carried on staffs, the ever present slogans that claimed Caesar as "son of God", "savior of the world" and "lord". The Roman legions went on for miles and the message must have been clear - don't mess with Rome. Yet the people showed up - the whole of the population of Jerusalem – perhaps as many as 40,000 some scholars think – were on the sidelines watching the display. It must have lasted for hours and by the time it was over I doubt there was a single resident who didn't know their place – elite or everyday, the empire expected you to stay in your place and play your role...it was the way that Empire worked, the way that Rome worked and the way that God worked.

The east gate, the lesser gate where mostly supplies and garbage were taken, saw a much shorter event. It didn't take long for Jesus on his donkey and his handful of disciples to walk past the small crowds and into the city. There was no great throng of people and most of them had come from the surrounding villages outside of Jerusalem to follow this rabbi who had been living among them and teaching them some very radical ideas about God and what he called the "kingdom of God". These peasants...they knew about kingdoms. They had lived under so many for so long and what they knew was that power corrupted and absolute power corrupted absolutely. They knew that a kingdom meant they were on the bottom. And they knew what god was – god was the one on the side of the most powerful. That's how you knew what god to worship...whoever was in charge had the best god.

So when this Jesus, the carpenter's son who came from Nazareth, when he began to teach them that God's Kingdom was a reversal – that in God's Kingdom those who were greatest were the least and the least the greatest, when he began to show them that God was on the side of the oppressed and marginalized, they were amazed. This makes no sense. Look around Jesus – do you not understand how the world works? They knew the golden rule – those who have the gold make the rules. What is this "love your neighbor as yourself" stuff? It is intriguing, but really...haven't you seen the Roman parade?

Jesus' march into Jerusalem wasn't a fun diversion or even a means of transportation...it was a political statement. It was a protest march. This coronation of Jesus as the one who is "coming in the name of the Lord" was the pronouncement of the coming of the Kingdom of God, which stood in contrast to the already present kingdom of Rome, the one marching in the west gate.

The peasants were shouting "God save us" because they needed to be saved. In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan do a great job of spelling out how central Jerusalem was to the Judean's lives and how long it had served as the cultural, religious and sacred city – more than a millennium. They point out that Jerusalem was both positive and negative – "the city of hope and the city of oppression, the city of joy and the city of pain." Jerusalem, after all, had been the creation of David, the ideal Jewish king, who had united the kingdom and ruled with the hand of a shepherd-king. Yet his own son Solomon – the one who built the first temple – had turned Jerusalem into a partner in what theologian Walter Wink calls a "domination system". By making the temple the only place one could receive forgiveness and the place which mediated God's presence, the temple system became one component of a domination system, a component that worked very well with the political and economic oppression that was to come.

Domination systems are not unique to the Judean story, nor are they unusual. In fact, this means of organizing power in the hands of a few at the expense of many could be called normative instead of abnormal. These systems allow for the elite to govern and use land ownership, laws, taxation, usury and indenture of labor to exploit the majority by the hand of the minority. It is not an unfamiliar pattern. One need only look at the horrific and disastrous history of Haiti to see that the earthquake didn't destroy that country; it was just the tipping point.

Jesus calls for his disciples to fetch a young colt for him to ride into the city and when he does this Jesus is doing two things. First, he is planning this protest march to mock the Roman

procession that will be occurring on the other side of the city. Second, he is making – as a good Rabbi would – a scriptural reference. Jesus is using symbolism from the prophet Zechariah, the same prophet whose dreamy, prophetic vision calls to Jerusalem to step away from the domination system and become the city of righteousness and faithfulness to God. Jesus' audience would be familiar with these texts and would know that his riding a colt into the city evoked this passage from Zechariah:

“Look, your king is approaching, he is vindicated and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem; the bow of war will be banished. He will proclaim peace to the nations...” (Zech 9:9-11)

When we think of peace, it is often in the abstract. We think of no more sending of other people to war, people we often don't even know. We think of negotiations, treaties, agreements. If you were to ask the people of Afghanistan or Iraq or the Sudan what peace looks like they would have a much more tangible vision. It would mean that my children aren't killed or forced into the militias, it would mean fewer land mines or roadside bombs for me to encounter, it would mean that I could farm or teach or work without constant fear or oppression by some external force fighting for or against things that cannot put food on my table or clothes on my children.

For these peasants, salvation wasn't dreamed in long visions of a special afterlife or the promise of reward after the suffering, it was contained in land that was theirs, food for their families, hope for security beyond the armed guards and the desire to live out from underneath the thumb of empire...in whatever flavor it came. That was what they hoped for from the messiah. So when they cried out “Hosanna”, they meant it – God save us! We need to be saved!

The lectionary passage for today is this same story, only it is from Luke. I chose Mark because I like Mark better and because it is an earlier version of the story without so much gloss on Jesus. Take this for instance, only in Mark do we see Jesus never using titles for himself. He doesn't call himself the “Son of Man” or the “Son of God”. Mark calls him by these titles, but Jesus never uses them himself. He even chastises the disciples when they call him the messiah, telling them to keep that to themselves.

So, if Jesus' focus in Mark isn't all of the titles we're used to, what is his message? He doesn't use the titles but he does say time and time again, in as many ways as possible, that the Kingdom of God is among you and that you must follow the way. See, John the Baptist says, I prepare the WAY of the Lord...this word in Greek is hodos, and it means the road or the journey or, as a metaphor, a course of conduct or way of thinking or choosing.

A journey requires participation. You can't sit still and get anywhere. You have to move and that means that the scenery will change, your legs will get sore and you will get tired. It is something we all experience, either physically or metaphorically. Who isn't tired of this long walk towards freedom and equality for all people? Whose legs aren't sore from walking a path for justice or caring for the marginalized in this world? Confrontation can wear you out. But the path that Jesus shows us is one that continues that confrontation, the one that marches into Jerusalem, the heart of the injustice, right up to the temple, ground zero for cooperation with the domination system. He tells his followers not to just believe in him, but to repent. Do you remember that word from a couple of weeks ago? The word that means to “turn around” or to

go beyond the mind you have? That is the journey – constantly confronting the domination systems in our world and in our hearts and minds and repenting.

See I think that Jesus is doing two things on that first Palm Sunday...he is making a political statement about the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Rome and how they do not rhyme... and he is making a visual aid for his teaching. Come and follow me all of you who are standing on the side of the road. Come and follow me into Jerusalem to face this domination system and to be reborn. This “way” that I am demonstrating to you is a journey, not just a statement. It is why Jesus called people to the way, not to raw belief.

Jesus has a twofold message – a political one and a spiritual one. As Crossan and Borg point out though, these things are not separable. They note that “The ‘Kingdom of God’ is a political as well as religious metaphor. Religiously, it is the kingdom of God; politically, it is the kingdom of God.” We are not divided creatures. What we believe spiritually affects what we believe materially, socially, economically and politically. Jesus spends this whole gospel telling his disciples that the “way” is about generosity, grace, compassion and love and that this “way” must be lived, not just imagined.

The imagined dreams of the parade goes...the ones watching Jesus marching into Jerusalem... they would not come to fruition...at least not in the way that they expected. They would soon see the other parade come down hard on those dreams, whipping and beating and eventually crucifying them. Part of the struggle this week comes with that repeated story. But we are not Good Friday people, we are Easter people. We don't leave the story on the cross as so many seem to do...our story comes full circle to the rolled away stone that tells us the gospel – the good news – that Jesus is Lord, and the powers of this world are not.

This week challenges us to confront the domination systems of our lives and to follow Jesus on a journey of personal transformation...through death into resurrection – where we encounter the risen Christ. It is only when we extend the most common evangelical form of Christian questioning – do you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior – with the more complete question that we see the path before us. Do you accept Jesus as your political Lord and Savior? Do you accept Jesus as your social – economic – material Lord and Savior? Do you accept Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your hodos...your course of conduct or way of choosing?

Seeing the world this way, changing our minds with repentance, this all speaks to us still here today...especially us, the ones who live in the middle of empire and benefit from domination systems, even though some are more abstract than others. The way of Jesus calls us to confront those things in our lives...to take up our cross daily and to walk into Jerusalem, where the tension of empire and hope mingle, to face those systems wherever we may find them. Then we live into both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of God.

The parades are marching and you get to choose which one you will follow. But know this – that one at the east gate...the smaller one with the visionary sitting on the donkey and just a few streamers and palm fronds...that parade doesn't need any more spectators. It needs people who are confronting the empire in their lives – inside and out. It needs people who are making their voices heard and becoming advocates for and allies to those on the hard side of the system. It needs those of us who live in that tension of benefitting from a system and being

run over by a system to live sacrificial lives...dying to some things so that new things might be born.

So here we stand...our palm fronds in hand. Let's get off the side of the road and start marching.

Hosanna!

AMEN



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