

Approaching Jerusalem  
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"Approaching Jerusalem" Pilgrim Church UCC, March 29, 2015—Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11)

Holy Week always begins on a high note—Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In some ways, we act it out every year. We begin outside waving our palm branches and process inside the sanctuary to contemplate the events of Jesus' final days. The trick of Holy Week is to be present in this moment while allowing yourself to be immersed in this story that happened 2,000 years ago. Time can stand still in these days as we stand in the places of our story's characters.

I need your help to tell the story, and need to leave the pulpit for a little while to do it. No, I'm not feeling sick or out of sorts or anything like that. Now in order for us to be immersed in the story, I'm going to need your wholehearted participation. Let's prove the stereotype that New England Congregationalists are "the frozen chosen" wrong. Please close your eyes to begin our story. Imagine that you are in the crowd in Jerusalem the day that Jesus enters the city in triumph. You are poor. You struggle to feed yourself and your family. You are Jewish. You live in a land that your ancestors fought for that is no longer your own. Your home is occupied by Rome, and they are always watching for any sign of rebellion. You need a Savior.

Please open your eyes. In your midst comes a man, Jesus from backwater, middle of nowhere Nazareth. You've heard about him—some say he's a great teacher and healer. Others say he's a rebel, nothing but a trouble maker. You come to the side of the road to see for yourself. Some of you are moved to take the cloaks off your backs and spread them on the road for him. It's the only one you have, but there's something special about this man. Others among you spread your branches before him or begin to wave them in the air. Someone in the crowd shouts: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Another begins taking up the cheer: "Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" Before you know it, all of you are crying out: "Hosanna!"

Jesus continues his journey up that road in Jerusalem to the Temple itself. He looks around at everything and everyone. He takes it all in. And then he leaves with his Disciples. He gives no sign that he will take up your call. Jesus just quietly walks away.

Thanks for helping me tell the story. Holy Week has begun.

If there was ever a time in his three year ministry that Jesus could have sparked an armed revolution, today was the day. The crowds were with him. The people were enthusiastically shouting their "Hosannas" which can be translated "Save us" or "Save now." He could have inspired the crowds—all of you—to storm the Temple or the Roman garrison. But he doesn't. That's not the kind of Messiah Jesus is. That's not who he is or what he's about.

Perhaps the most anti-climactic part of our story is when Mark tells us: "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."<sup>[1]</sup> No win one for the Gipper speech or anything! I wonder what he was thinking as he was inside the Temple looking around at everything and everyone gathered all around him. The very next day, he and his Disciples went back into the Temple complex and Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out everyone who was selling and buying goods and Temple sacrifices. Don't you remember that "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have

made it a den of robbers." [2] The chief priests and the scribes begin to look for a way to kill him, meanwhile the crowd is still spellbound by his teachings.

Very few people have ever risked their lives to speak truth to power in such a momentous and lasting way. Jesus taught people that the Kingdom of God was here and now. Jesus tried to build the upside-down Kingdom of God on earth as it will be in heaven. A Kingdom where the first will be last and the last will be first. A Kingdom where a widow with one coin can give more than the rich in the Temple. A Kingdom where a Father runs out to embrace his wayward, lost son who finally comes home.

Jesus protested against the role of priestly mediators and the need for poor people to pay expensive sacrifices to be forgiven and get right with God. As Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us, "His protest was against a domination system legitimized in the name of God, a domination system radically different from what the already present and coming kingdom of God, the dream of God, would be like. It was not Jesus against Judaism, or Judaism against Jesus." [3] Jesus just had a different idea about what loyalty to God looks like, what worshiping God looks like, what trusting God looks like, and what God intends for our lives to look like than many of his contemporaries.

Now why does this story matter today? Maybe just like those crowds in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, we need saved too. We're not an occupied nation and most of us have what we need—we can provide and care for ourselves and our families. But sometimes things go wrong. When you (hopefully) said your hosannas, your heart felt just a little lighter. It's a funny word—but what would it look like if you asked God to save you? And I'm not talking about eternity, I'm talking about now.

God save me from anger. God save me from loneliness. God save me from soul-shattering disappointments. God save me from that kid who's mean to me in school. God save me from bitterness. God save me from one more family fight. God save me from fear. God save me from overwhelming stress at work. God save me from my broken heart. God save me from cancer. God save my children from what they're going through. God save me. God save those I love.

I like Palm Sunday because it's an honest story. The crowds who gathered around Jesus needed saving and they weren't afraid to ask for it. They weren't afraid to be honest. They didn't pretend that life was grand all the time, having it far worse than we can probably imagine. Sometimes we get ourselves into so much trouble when we think that we can go it alone, and that we don't need saving. Professor Brene Brown recently wrote that "Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as hard as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable."

It's true that we don't need saving in the same ways as those crowds in Jerusalem. Yet, what would it be like if we recognized those moments when we need saved and owned our story and our vulnerabilities and asked God for help? If we acted like those people who could open up their eyes and see Jesus in their midst? Now I wish that every single time we ask God to save us or will ask God to save us that God immediately answers our prayer. God isn't a vending machine—we don't put a prayer in, select the outcome, and out pops whatever it was our heart desired. Just as Jesus was not the Messiah many people expected or even wanted, God may not work exactly how we want God to work.

God's ways are mysterious, yet God works through people for sure. There's power in naming and even embracing our vulnerabilities—recognizing that we need some saving. Sometimes I think that Jesus saw us with God's eyes all the time—that's what made people realize that

there was something special about him. God could work through him so easily. So that when Jesus looked back at the gathered crowd and looked around the Temple, Jesus saw humanity with the eyes of God and those people felt it deep within their souls. Jesus must have also felt a sinking realization that this path he was walking wasn't going to end with saving them how they wanted to be saved. No, Jesus couldn't save the people from the Romans or the religious authorities who took advantage of them or from poverty or many other hardship they faced. Not immediately, not right when they asked for it on that roadside in Jerusalem.

Instead, Jesus saved people for new life. Jesus saved them for an alternate path. Jesus saved them for this vision of God who will run down that road to meet God's lost and wayward children. Jesus saved them for this new Way that made life more bearable and meaningful and full of God's grace. And the best news is that Jesus saves us for that too. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Mark 11:11.

[2] Mark 11: 17.

[3] Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, 30.