

“Entering”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 27, 2024

Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:19-29

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 11:1-11

Introduction

This Sunday marks Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as the city is preparing for Passover, an event which he has predicted will lead to his condemnation and death. The disciples, like us, cannot truly ready themselves for all the events this week will hold: from “Hosanna” to “Crucify” to “Alleluia,” the movements of this week are hard to prepare for.

Passover marks the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt and is a significant identity marker for the Jewish people. In the Old Testament, calls to care for the suffering and oppressed often bear the rationale of the Lord’s deliverance of the people from Egypt. The celebrants of this Passover festival gather each year to mark the deliverance God has already brought to the people of Israel by freeing them from enslavement. God is already known as the one who delivers and saves.

Read Mark 11:1-11

The core meaning of the name Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God, is *shalom* which means ‘wholeness’ and ‘completeness.’ The word *shalom*, ‘peace’ comes from this word because any true peace depends on both wholeness and completeness. The first part of the name Jerusalem is *yir-oo* which can either mean ‘they will see’ or ‘they will feel the awe.’ When we put the parts together, we fully understand the name Jerusalem: ‘they will see the wholeness’ or ‘they will feel the awe of completeness.’

It also helps to recall the history of Jerusalem as a royal city. It was King David who made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom, and it was David’s son, King Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem. The historical books of the

Old Testament remember Jerusalem as the ‘city of David,’ while the Psalms associate Jerusalem, or Zion, with God’s king.

No wonder, then, that by the time Jesus enters Jerusalem for the Passover (his first and only visit in Mark’s Gospel), public opinion has turned messianic. Bystanders welcome Jesus into the city not only with the standard pilgrimage refrain of Psalm 118: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*, but with an explicitly royal elaboration: *Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David*. They cover the ground with cloaks and cut branches to wave as signals of Jesus’ royal identity.

Passover is, therefore, a political festival, recalling the central event of Jewish history in which the leader of a group of enslaved people confronts the leader of an oppressive power and gains liberation through divine intervention. In the time of Jesus, Jews from around the ancient world would flock to Jerusalem for this high moment of celebration, and the story was retold each year with notes of anticipation and joy.

During feast days, especially at Passover, political tensions reached a fever pitch. Some fervent Jews, known as the Zealots, would use the opportunity of these many pilgrims in the city to cause a commotion in the crowd. The Romans increased their military presence to prevent an open revolt. The soldiers, charged with keeping the peace in Jerusalem at Passover, would have been on high alert as pilgrims entered the city. It is in this context that our story takes place.¹

It is unclear exactly who these crowds are and what they believed about Jesus. He has yet to teach, preach, or heal anyone in Jerusalem. Are they ones who have followed him throughout his travels? Are they visitors from afar? Do they think Jesus is the coming king? If so, what gives them that impression? And if this crowd believes that Jesus is the long-awaited messiah, how do these shouts of ‘Hosanna’ and blessing so quickly give way to ‘crucify’ and condemnation?

On the one hand, it is clear that Mark wants us to view Jesus as a coming king, but only by helping us re-imagine the concept of a king in accordance with Jesus’ mission. Mark’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus on a mission, not to conquer peoples and land, but to restore a broken humanity to its divinely created wholeness. That is the kind of king Mark calls us to follow, and the kind of kingdom that Mark’s Jesus calls us to enter.

¹ John Squires, “Why Jesus would have never ridden a horse.”

Jesus' mission is not to die, per se. Rather, Jesus knows that his unbridled approach to human wholeness has proven too disruptive and offensive for those wielding power in his day. Jesus chooses death because toning down God's healing love – only to avoid death – is not an option. Jesus can only love completely. Jesus knows that this kind of love will overcome death itself. So, this is not your normal power-wielding, army-raising king.²

During this Lenten season, we have been challenged to be *local pilgrims*; looking, as we journey through our neighborhoods and communities, for God at work in our midst. The daily devotional entries that many of us have been reading have asked us to take notice of who and what we see while at work or home, visiting libraries or shopping in stores. We have been told to pay attention to the beauty of nature, the solitude of labyrinths and the hard work of sanitation workers. In all these places, it is our choice whether or not to see, who and what we take note of when we open our eyes. Do we see the holy in the ordinary? Can we perceive the divine at work in our midst?

We are sensory people. We can imagine, as Jesus was entering Jerusalem, the sounds of different languages being spoken among the pilgrims. We can feel the tension of having Roman soldiers all around. We can smell the unleavened bread being baked for the Passover meal. We can see the palm fronds being waved by the crowds and hear the shouts of expectation that their king is coming.

Here in this holy place, we see the divine through banners and murals, we smell the wood of the pews and coffee being brewed, and we hear the sound of percussion and song. We feel the weight of hymnals in our hands and the touch of our neighbors when passing the peace. And we believe that God is present in all these sensory ways, infused by the words of the stories that are read and the imaginations of the people who seek to follow the one who comes in the name of the Lord, who ushers in the kingdom wholeness and peace.

But the kingdom that Jesus announced and ushered in does not just exist inside the walls of our church building. We also sense it when we walk outside our doors and see beauty and hear laughter and feel compassion in our communities.

If you ever question whether God is at work in our world, I encourage you to check out the videos that our mission partner Humble Design of Cleveland posts online. This amazing organization collects furniture, housewares, toys – anything that someone transitioning out of homelessness and into a living situation might

² Ira Brent Driggers from *WorkingPreacher.com*

need – and fully furnishes and decorates their new spaces. This week, I was watching one of the reveal videos and recognized pictures, an area rug, a side table and a shower curtain all donated from our Pass-It-On store, which had been donated from members of this community. Because of these seemingly small actions – sharing what we have or maybe no longer need, given to committed volunteers and organizations dedicated to helping others – homes can be completely outfitted for those who have so little.

When we open our eyes to the world around us, we can see God at work, siding with the oppressed, looking to heal the hurting and broken. When Jesus enters Jerusalem – riding not on a war-horse but a humble colt – he is making a statement that his kingdom will be unlike that of the Romans, that his way is different from those who use violence, even willing to kill Jesus in order to silence him; his is a way of wholeness through peace.

We believe that because Jesus chose this pathway of complete love – that not even the prospect of death would divert his mission to heal the suffering and free the oppressed – we can see the fullness and feel the awe of completeness as local pilgrims in our own community. The holy is present in the ordinary; Jesus is the peace, the shalom, that surpasses human understanding. Because he lives – overcoming the powers and perpetrators of death – we also live in this new Jerusalem, the place where peace is fully revealed.

Still, it is up to us to share and live out this story. Some people want to make Jesus into a conquering king, forcing others to act or think in the way we believe is holy or right. But Jesus teaches us that true power lies in weakness; that it is in giving of ourselves – our compassion, acceptance, understanding, time, or resources – that we gain the completeness, the fullness of life that God intends for us.

So, let us enter into this holy week knowing that its movements, and its emotions, are hard to prepare for. It will be filled with power and weakness, beauty and ugliness, despair and hope. For, this story from so long ago is our story as well; the Jerusalem of old, where wholeness is seen, where completeness is felt in awe, is very much like the place where we journey as local pilgrims today. May we walk with our eyes, and our hearts, open. Amen.