

Palm Sunday B 2024 Mark 11:1-11

I was invited to take a part in Friday's Purim service at Temple Beth Israel. Purim is traditionally celebrated with a recitation or reenactment of the book of Esther, where everyone cheers when the heroes Esther and Mordecai's names are read and boos when the villain Haman's name is read. I especially enjoy Rabbi Audrey's annual creative re-writes of the story: one year she used Dr. Seuss and this year she set the characters' dialogue to Taylor Swift songs. The pop culture updates are a good reminder that although ancient the scripture was written in a particular context, it is universally relevant and still speaking to us today. As we begin to work our way through our sacred drama of Holy Week, we remember these are not just historical events but an invitation to us to a renewed way of life.

Some churches squeeze the entire Passion narrative into this last Sunday before Easter. That way if folks don't attend midweek services, they don't skip from Jesus' so called triumphal entry to his glorious resurrection without confronting the harder-to-read parts in between: betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and burial. Even our hymns swing wildly from today's parade march, to the most minor keys, and back again in just one week. Do come back on Thursday and Friday, or if you can't, read through the rest of Mark's gospel between now and next Sunday because today we are going to work on understanding just this brief passage on its own.

The change in tone across these next days makes it seem as if Jesus gets the parade he deserves today, then on Easter receives the glory that is his due, but has to endure a very un-Jesuy week in between. Truly, the crowds turning from hosannas to shouts of "crucify!" portrays a brutal picture of how unfaithful and capricious human nature can be. Yet that's not the main contrast going on in the story. Let's take a close look at today's parade:

As Jesus, his disciples, and religious pilgrims from all over the world were making their way to Jerusalem for Passover, the Roman army would have moved in to ensure a strong police presence among the crowds. We read about Jesus coming from Bethany, approaching the eastern wall of the city while at the same time we can imagine Pilate approaching the gate on the western side. Pilate would have ridden a well trained war horse. Jesus rode an unbroken colt—probably not a very dignified ride. Pilate would have been accompanied by an army of soldiers. Jesus had his disciples and some bystanders. We still roll out the red carpet for important arrivals like Pilate's would have been. Jesus' way was prepared with a patchwork of cloaks and tree branches. Pilate takes the place of honor as Rome-in-residence for the duration of the festival. When Jesus gets to the temple, he takes a look around, and heads back out of

town again—no governor’s palace for him. We call this Jesus’ triumphal entry, but there’s irony here. All the pomp and circumstance we could imagine in Pilate’s arrival is maybe not “mocked” by Jesus, but is certainly contradicted by the simple humility that has characterized Jesus’ life up to this point and will continue to be reflected in Jesus’ last acts this week.

This is one of the places in scripture where Jesus shows us that he is not aspiring to earthly standards or living by humanity’s rules. We may want the conquering hero and mighty ruler who arrives with armies and riches and political power, but Jesus showed up as the opposite. There is a tendency, maybe this week of most of all, to want to get through all the dark and dismal parts of the story: Jesus washing feet, weeping in the garden, getting arrested, wearing a crown of thorns, and forgiving people from the cross. Can’t we just get to the good part, where he comes back as glorious Christus Victor, defeater of death and the grave? But we shouldn’t think of Triumphant Parade Jesus and Victorious Resurrected Jesus as the *real* Jesus and think that the messy business of suffering in between was some kind of anomaly. Because if we are waiting for Jesus to conform to *our* idea of what a King should be and for God’s kingdom to conform to *our* idea of what this world should look like, we have missed who Jesus is and what Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were about.

If we ignore how Jesus lived, his teaching, preaching, and serving, and only picture him being glorified as a conquering human ruler, we’re making God in our preferred image, when it’s supposed to be the other way around. Jesus had the chance to do things the way humanity has always done them, to make everyone follow him by coercion and force, by taking over through military and political power; instead he rode a donkey, washed feet, and taught his disciples to love one another. He invited people into a life of selfless lovingkindness through his own example. Christian discipleship means doing likewise.

Over these next days as we return to this sacred story, watch how the Son of God chose humility over grandeur, non-resistance over violence, serving over being served, forgiveness over vengeance, a cross over a sword. This is how God changed the world *and* how *we* are called to keep changing the world in Jesus’ name. We don’t look away from the tougher parts of the story; that wasn’t just what Jesus had to do way back when, that’s Jesus showing us God’s way for today and tomorrow and so long as there are people left to love. May this Holy Week be a fresh revelation of how God’s way of humble, selfless, grace redeems and restores what the ways of this world never could.