

“JESUS WEPT”
Mark 11:1-11
Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021
Sixth Sunday in Lent

Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem to the cheers of many people. They laid palm branches and cloaks on the ground before him to cushion his pathway. He at first thought they were shouting their devotions to God, but when he realized it was he they were cheering and adoring, he wept, for they did not understand. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in Mark 11, verses 1-11:

When they were nearing Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany on Mount Olives, he sent off two of the disciples with instructions: “Go to the village across from you. As soon as you enter, you’ll find a colt tethered, one that has never yet been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, ‘What are you doing?’ say, ‘The Master needs him, and will return him right away.’”

They went and found a colt tied to a door at the street corner and untied it. Some of those standing there said, “What are you doing untying that colt?” The disciples replied exactly as Jesus had instructed them, and the people let them alone. They brought the colt to Jesus, spread their coats on it, and he mounted.

The people gave him a wonderful welcome, some throwing their coats on the street, others spreading out rushes they had cut in the fields. Running ahead and following after, they were calling out,

Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!

Blessed the coming kingdom of our father David!

Hosanna in highest heaven!

He entered Jerusalem, then entered the Temple. He looked around, taking it all in. But by now it was late, so he went back to Bethany with the Twelve.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

By the time the Gospel of Mark is written in the 60s, Jesus is long gone, and Nero has burned down most of Rome, blaming the out-of-control blaze on the ghetto Jews living on the other side of the Tiber River. A convenient target, Nero's scapegoating of the impoverished remnant from Jerusalem seals their fate and most of them perish in the ensuing purge.

By the year 70, Jerusalem is also destroyed by the Romans and becomes a symbolic historical, emotional, and spiritual center of the Hebrew faith, the location of the First and Second temples. Jerusalem had been where the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel had met, the place where the diversity of the Hebrew people had found creativity and harmony.

The Hebrew name for Jerusalem, Jeru-Shalom, means "City of Peace," "wholeness", the joining of opposites. This is why in Judaism the word "shalom" is used both as a greeting upon seeing someone and as a sending off when saying goodbye.

But Jerusalem, for Jesus, was anything but peaceful. Once when he was there visiting the Temple, he acted uncharacteristically out of rage, creating mayhem in the holy site courtyard. The gospel writers disagree over how many times he visited Jerusalem during his ministry, but when he came for what was to be his final time, it was for the Feast of Passover. The Gospel writers agree that he was greeted by a large throng of people cheering, "Hosanna!" They thought he had come to lead a revolt against the hated Romans. They wanted him to be their king.

Jesus wept.

As Rob Bell reminds us in *Love Wins*, "Jesus lived in an incredibly volatile political climate." The Romans had conquered Jerusalem and instituted military control. There was a large presence of soldiers during the Passover

Feast, “patrolling the streets and standing guard over the temple, reminding everybody of their conquest and power.”

Those in the crowd who wanted to start the revolt were looking for Jesus to lead them into battle, to wage a holy war to liberate the Jews and drive the Romans out of Jerusalem. But, as Rob Bell continues,

Jesus wasn't interested. He was trying to bring Israel back to its roots, to its divine calling to be a light to the world, showing the nations just what the redeeming love of God looks like.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey as a symbol not of power and war, but rather of humility and service. For those who want him to be their king, he disappoints them terribly. For those who want to meet violence with violence, he is not their man. For those who think he is God's answer to their suffering, he is not. He suffers alongside them, but he cannot be the warlord they want. He weeps as he rides into the city, “because he realizes that they just don't get it.”

Palm Sunday is a strange day at the end of Lent. It has been treated in Christianity as a celebration; at UCCPH in years past we have gleefully watched the children parade through the sanctuary with their palm branches. They are so cute, and we love to see them involved with the Bible story. We sing, “Hosannah!” while the mood is party-like and upbeat. But quickly following the parade, we are asked to switch gears and get ready for the Passion of Jesus—his arrest, torture, trial, and execution. The party is soon over and the mood darkens with a somber surrender to the darkness of the story. It's a really weird, awkward transition, isn't it?

It reminds me of the horrific tragedy we witnessed this week in Boulder. Here we are feeling energized by spring, hopeful that with our vaccinations

we can soon again be outside with others, inside in restaurants, movie theatres, and church, returning more and more to our normal lives. We sing “Hosannah!” as our number at last comes up on the vaccination queue and we get our shots...and then...this. This senseless violence.

The 10 victims were also going about their normal routine. Going grocery shopping, just stopping in King Soopers for a Starbuck’s, or patrolling Boulder’s usually calm neighborhoods, they had no idea that their lives would end on March 22, 2021. Their families, friends, and co-workers had no idea their lives were to be forever marred by incomprehensible loss and the memory of another Colorado mass shooting. We have become so numb to this type of events, haven’t we? Atlanta last week, Boulder this week, and some other municipality or county next week--our Hosannah’s are cut off in mid-song, replaced by the terrible, growl-like sounds of intense anguish and disbelief as condolence calls are made to the families of the victims early on the morning of March 23rd.

So, who is Jesus for *you* on this Palm Sunday? Is he the smoke screen you send ahead into the fray to protect you from your pain? Is Jesus your “go to” image that you pray to for help in overcoming your life struggles? It’s hard to face life’s challenges alone; it’s comforting to have Jesus alongside, breaking down barriers, tossing attackers off your road, and giving you reassurance that God is on your side.

Is Jesus a teacher and a guide for you? Perhaps you relate to him in our weekly scripture lessons, parables and stories. Do you find the answer to life’s mysteries in his messages and in his ministry? Sometimes we are feeling bereft, not knowing the right way to turn in the situations of our lives; many

people find comfort in both well-known scripture passages and in wonderful new discoveries within the pages of the Bible that reveal God's Good News for humanity.

Is Jesus your ticket to heaven? Is this how you relate to him, that you believe a so-called "personal relationship with Jesus" is the key to eternal life after your death? As I talked about last Sunday, this is still a mainstay belief in evangelical circles. It might make you feel better to check off the box that declares, "Yep, I have accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior," and thereby guarantee you the post-life story you want. Personally, I think this is a mischaracterization of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus and I doubt knowing these passwords move St. Peter to unlock the gates of heaven for anyone who can recite them. On the other hand, if you don't know them or can't recall them when you get to the Pearly Gates....oh well too bad for you. Does it really make sense that this is the litmus test for eternal life with God? I can't see it. I hope none of you really believe that *only* Christians—the *right* kind of Christians—can claim God's love.

My grandmother on my mother's side was the type of Pentecostal Christian who believed strongly in the dichotomy of heaven and hell. Moreover, she knew she was going straight to heaven because she was the right kind of Christian, *and* she backed the right kind of horse. She prayed that we, like her, would accept Jesus Christ into our hearts as Lord and Savior.

In the 1980s, a certain flamboyant televangelist preacher, who shall remain nameless but who founded Oral Roberts University, sold his handprints on cloth to his television audience of believers, claiming that they had the power to heal medical and spiritual illness. He claimed to have had a direct vision of God and that God told him that he needed to raise several

million dollars for his ministry by a certain date or he would die. My grandmother bought six handprint cloths costing \$10,000 each. She believed these handprints would go with her upon her death, seal her entrance into heaven, and buy our way in, too, because they showed just how faithful and sinless she had been in her life. She would hear none of any of my arguments to the contrary.

This was one of many scams of the original Prosperity Gospel perpetrated against lonely, vulnerable people who were scared into pulling out their checkbooks so as to protect themselves from eternal judgment and condemnation to the “conscious and endless fires of hell.”

Jesus wept as he rode the donkey into Jerusalem, and he weeps still, every time his intentions are misunderstood and every time people try to prove their righteousness with violence. He wanted no part of being a king or waging a holy war, and he never would have supported a religious spokesperson using his name to finance a preaching and healing business that earned \$110 million per year—that’s 110 million in 1980s dollars. Jesus was not for sale then and he is not for sale now.

What do you need this Palm Sunday? What do you need to know about God’s eternal love and the core message of the Good News?

What do you need Easter to be or do for you next week? It is a good time to assess where you need resurrection and redemption, how you will go forth in your faith life from Easter into Eastertide and beyond. What will be your priorities and what will you leave behind as you venture ahead?

This is the time. This is the time to end your Lenten journey and emerge from your wilderness isolation with a clear head and a clean heart, for God and Jesus and the world need your love now, more than ever.

May it Be So.

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