

“Blessed Is the One”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Palm Sunday – April 1, 2012

Mark 11: 1-11

Fred Craddock writes the following about Palm Sunday: “Even if we’ve set out on the Lenten pilgrimage on Ash Wednesday and taken every step in penitence and prayer, we are still not prepared for the arrival. Neither were those who joined Jesus in Galilee and made their way up to Jerusalem. For many it was an annual pilgrimage, this Passover. Others, having to travel greater distances, see the Holy City through the joyful tears of those who know they will never make the journey again. But in one particular year, the pilgrimage was a once-in-a-lifetime experience because it was made in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. For him too, Jerusalem was the end of a pilgrimage” (*“Protest March,” Christian Century, April 5, 2003, p.20*).

I imagine many of the people in Jerusalem on that first day of the week before the Passover figured it was a day they would not forget. A stir in the streets and marketplaces, chants and shouts of “Hosanna!”, palms and branches swaying in the breeze, an electricity which filled the air and made you feel like something special was happening. That’s how we’ve always read the story in the church, and remember that celebration in our worship. But do we always remember why the people rejoiced in that way?

There was an atmosphere of excitement due to the annual celebration of the Passover. That was heightened by the fact that many in the crowds had heard much about this Jesus of Nazareth, had heard of his ministry throughout Judea and Galilee, and wondered if he was the one. Was he the one promised by God to save Israel and reign over the people as a divine king? Was he the one who would destroy Israel’s enemies in battle and establish a new kingdom like that of David? Was Jesus the one who was to be called the Messiah, the Son of God?

There was always a gap in awareness between Jesus and his followers regarding the Messiah. The people believed that the Messiah would be this great warrior king who would overthrow all the earthly powers that have enslaved the Jews for so long. Jesus had a different interpretation of his Messianic role, and it is that difference of opinion which would lead to confrontation and suffering.

Once again in this familiar passage, we hear the people’s impression of who the Messiah should be. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” If this Jesus is truly the Messiah, then he will come and establish David’s kingdom in the here and now. He shall be welcomed as a king returning from battle – with palms and cloaks and shouts of joy and celebration. This shall be a day of rejoicing, a day of triumph for our God!

But is it really a day for rejoicing? Look closer and you will see the ironic twists which point to what will happen later in the week. This king of kings rides in on a pack mule, a donkey which has never been ridden before. Once he has entered

the city, instead of immediately making speeches and changes, he simply looks around and then goes back to Bethany with his disciples since it was late (11:11). And then there is what happens after this day of rejoicing comes to a close.

On Monday, Jesus enters the temple and completely disrupts the day's business and trade. He throws the money-changers out, he condemns those who are selling and trading livestock and birds, he overturns tables and chairs and makes an absolute mess of it all. On Tuesday and Wednesday, he spends his time teaching things which really get the Pharisees' goat. He challenges their authority, and refuses to be drawn into a trap regarding taxes or the greatest commandment. All-in-all, Jesus acts nothing like the Messiah which everyone expected. Instead of overthrowing the Roman powers to free the Jews, he overthrows the Jewish hierarchy and causes so much anger and hostility, it would eventually get him killed.

The ultimate irony, of course, is that it is these same crowds that are shouting "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday who will be shouting "Crucify him!" on Good Friday. Rather than raising palm branches and spreading their cloaks in front of Jesus, they will strip him of his clothing and whip him across his back with branches and switches. As one commentator has said, "All too soon, the crowds . . . will demand the release of a common criminal and the death of 'the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Why is this the case? Because the Messiah the crowds want on Palm Sunday turns out to be quite different than the Messiah they get throughout Holy Week. "They desire the genial guest, the teacher who will say what they want to hear and in ways that are pretty and soothing. The 'kingdom they prepare to receive in verse 10 is not a kingdom for which they are prepared" ([Texts for Preaching](#), Yr. B, 248).

Who is the Jesus we want on this Palm Sunday? Is it the happy, smiling Jesus riding on a donkey's back, who is accepting the crowds' adoration and praise? Is it the Son of God who rides triumphantly as a king to bring a new rule to this world of ours? Is it a Messiah who will take care of all of our problems, penalizing the people in this world who do nothing but cause trouble and disturb the way things are? Is that the Jesus we are seeking this Palm Sunday?

Or are we willing to receive the Jesus who indeed comes this Holy Week? Are we willing to hear the words which he will utter that do not sit well with our traditional understanding of how this world is to be ordered? Are we truly willing to love our neighbors as ourselves, even if that neighbor is poor, or unkempt, or of a different skin color? Are we truly willing to give as the widow gave, not out of abundance, but out of our poverty, giving to God all which we have to live on? Which Jesus will it be? Which Jesus will we welcome into our hearts this Palm Sunday?

In the end, this is a day for rejoicing, but not for the obvious reasons. It is a day of rejoicing because God's chosen one is fulfilling God's plan. Not as this great warrior who conquers in violent acts of war. Instead, this Messiah is a humble king, humble enough to ride on the back of a donkey, humble enough to not worry about his own life but instead to care for the lives of others, humble enough to die for his people, even though they know not what they do. Despite our hardened hearts and misguided ways, God loves us still through the death of God's only begotten Son.

Today we celebrate – not only with palm branches and cloaks thrown down on the ground, but also with our very selves prone at the feet of “the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

The following is a poem from Ann Weems entitled “Between Parades”:

We’re good at planning!
Give us a task force
 and a project
 and we’re off and running!
No trouble at all!
 Going to the village and finding the colt,
 even negotiating with the owners
 is right down our alley.
And how we love a parade!
In a frenzy of celebration
 we gladly focus on Jesus
 and generously throw our coats
 and palms in his path.
And we can shout praise
 loudly enough
 to make the Pharisees complain.
It’s all so good!

It’s between the parades that
 we don’t do so well.
From Sunday to Sunday
 we forget our hosannas.
Between parades
 the stones will have to shout
 because we don’t.

(Ann Weems, [Kneeling in Jerusalem](#), 69).

May we find our voices between the parades of life, so that the Messiah of our God might be welcomed into our hearts with praise and thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God! Amen.