

Jesus' Final Week
Palm Sunday
Mark 11:1-11
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Last week, we concluded our seven-week study of the first 10 chapters of Mark's Gospel. I titled the series "Glimpses of the Kingdom," because in highlighting Jesus' preaching and teaching and miracles, Mark intentionally makes his case to his readers that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that his coming marked the arrival of the kingdom of God.

This morning—the first Sunday of Lent—we'll begin tracing Jesus' final week on earth by studying Mark chapters 11–16. Over the next six weeks, we'll explore each day of Holy Week, beginning this morning with Palm Sunday and ending with Good Friday. While it might seem odd to focus on Palm Sunday six weeks before Easter, what I like about it is that instead of compressing all the important events of Holy Week into seven days, we'll be focusing on Jesus' final week for the entirety of Lent. I invite you to follow along as I read Mark 11:1–11—the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

¹⁰ "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.
(Mark 11:1-11)

Most of us are familiar with the events of Palm Sunday, but we can't fully understand Jesus' celebrated entry into Jerusalem four days before He was arrested without placing this day in its historic Jewish context. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on that Sunday, the holy city, in addition to its normal inhabitants, was pulsing with two groups of people who weren't normally there: religious pilgrims from all over the world and legions of Roman soldiers.

Thousands of Jewish pilgrims journeyed to the holy city of Jerusalem each year to celebrate Passover. The Jewish calendar was filled with Holy Days (from which we get our word holiday), but Passover was the most celebrated of them all. Passover was the celebration of God's deliverance of his people from 400 years of Egyptian rule. On the night the Israelites were finally released from Egypt, God brought the most horrific of his 10 plagues on the Egyptians. Listen to the words God used to describe this plague to Moses from Exodus chapter 11.

Now the LORD had said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely. So Moses said, "This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any person or animal.' Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. ⁸All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave." (Exodus 11:1, 4-8)

God instructed his people, the Israelites, to kill a lamb as a sacrifice and to place a stripe of blood above their doorposts so that the angel of death would know which homes to pass over as he traveled through Egypt. Events unfolded just as God told Moses they would: Egyptians all over Egypt lost their firstborn sons and livestock while the Israelites, who had the blood of the lamb over their doorpost, were spared. After this terrible plague, Pharaoh released the Israelites from bondage. On their way to the Promised Land, God instructed his people to celebrate the Passover as a reminder of their

deliverance from their slavery. It was during the annual Passover celebration that Jesus entered Jerusalem to a raucous crowd's welcome just days before his arrest.

Passover was a glorious time of celebration for what God had done for his people, but it also served as a stark reminder to the Israelites that they were no longer free. Egyptian captivity had been replaced by Roman oppression, and just as they had in Egypt centuries earlier, the Israelites longed to be free. During Passover, the Jewish people looked with anticipation for their deliverer, and not surprisingly, through the years, many leaders had come proclaiming deliverance and declaring themselves to be the promised Messiah.

The second group of visitors who filled Jerusalem that Sunday were legions of Roman soldiers under the command of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. These soldiers were on high alert during Passover, guarding against the threat of armed rebellions and prepared to quickly and ruthlessly extinguish any attempted uprisings by revolutionary leaders and their followers who dared to challenge Rome's authority.

Jerusalem was teeming with people that Sunday—religious pilgrims celebrating the Festival of Passover and Roman soldiers on the lookout for potential rebellions. Into this tinderbox came Jesus, the popular rabbi, who had gained a sizeable following by preaching and teaching with authority and performing miracles that included raising Jairus' daughter and Lazarus from the dead. I'd like to read Jason Porterfield's account of what took place next from his book, "Fight Like Jesus."

As Jesus neared Jerusalem, the people who lined his path began chanting, "Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna!" Nowadays we use the word *hosanna* primarily as an expression of praise to God. It has become an interjection of adoration, similar to *hallelujah*.

But on that day outside Jerusalem, the word meant something far different. *Hosanna* is the Aramaic form of a two-part Hebrew word—the verb *hosiah* coupled with the emphatic particle *na*. *Hosiah* means, "help us, deliver us, liberate us, save us." The ending *na* conveys a sense of urgency. When fused together with, *hosiahna* meant "Oh, save us now!" or "Deliver us, we plead!" In essence it was a cry for help. (Jason Porterfield, "Fight Like Jesus," p. 31)

The crowds were heaping praise on Jesus, but their praise rested on the belief that He had come to rescue them. Mark tells us that people covered the roadways with their cloaks, and others spread branches they had cut from the fields. These actions were associated with the coronation of a new king. The people weren't simply welcoming a religious leader they respected; they were attempting to make

Jesus their king. Porterfield points out that palm branches were a politically loaded symbol with great historical significance.

Jesus was aware of this history and symbolism. He didn't naively enter Jerusalem, oblivious to what was going on. He took the opportunity to use this setting for a prophetic act by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. (I want to acknowledge again that I owe much of the background I'm sharing to Jason Porterfield's book, "Fight Like Jesus." Porterfield does a great job tying a lot of loose ends together that help to put Palm Sunday in context for us.)

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey communicated two messages. First, coming into the city on a donkey confirmed Jesus was a king. By riding a donkey no one else had ridden and allowing his disciples to set Him on the animal, Jesus was following a historic practice and making a clear statement that He was coming into Jerusalem as a king. For example, in the Old Testament, in 1 Kings chapter 1, David arranged for his son, Solomon, to enter Jerusalem on a mule no one had ever ridden as part of his coronation ceremony when he was introduced as king.

Jesus' choice of a donkey as his transportation, rather than a stallion, also communicated a clear message. Entering Jerusalem on a donkey was a statement that this king came in peace, not violence and war. Bible scholar J.F. Coakley writes, "By not riding a horse, as a nationalistic messiah would be expected to do, Jesus intended to rebuke or correct the aspirations of those who acclaimed him. He was acting out the role of a humble, peaceable king." The crowd should have understood that Jesus' use of a donkey symbolized peace rather than war, but in their fervor and hunger for deliverance, they continued to hope Jesus would lead a rebellion to overthrow Rome.

In his gospel, Jesus' disciple John quotes the prophet Zechariah, tying Jesus' mission to a peaceful rather than a war-like entrance.

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9–10)

Jesus embraced another important piece of symbolism that wasn't quite as overt. Sunday was historically the first day of Passover. This was the day when, according to Exodus 12:3, every Jewish

family would select a lamb for their household to eat the Passover meal. Each family was instructed to bring their lamb through the entrance to the city known as “The Sheep Gate.” As Jesus traveled down the Mount of Olives and into the city, it’s likely his route would have taken Him through the entrance known as “The Sheep Gate.” To those who were paying attention, Jesus was offering Himself to Israel as the sacrificial or Passover lamb, sent by God to take away the sin of the world.

Throughout our study of Mark’s Gospel, I’ve referenced Jesus’ “upside-down kingdom.” The phrase “upside-down” speaks to how radically different Jesus’ kingdom and its values are when compared with the priorities of our world. The contrast between Jesus’ kingdom and the world in which we live can be clearly seen in the difference between a famous Jewish rebellion that occurred nearly 200 years earlier and Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

In 167 B.C., Jerusalem was under the rule of a Greek empire known as the Seleucids. Their king, Antiochus, overran Jerusalem and then systematically desecrated the temple by slaughtering a pig on the altar and sprinkling its blood throughout the temple area. Then all the Jews were ordered to make sacrifices to the Greek gods, and soldiers were sent to each town to enforce this decree. In one town, after a Jew agreed to make the heretical sacrifice to spare his life, an old priest named Mattathias stabbed the Jewish man to death and then killed the soldier sent to enforce the sacrifices. The priest tore down the pagan altar and ran to the hills to hide. As the end of his life neared, the aged, ailing man, still in hiding, called his five sons to him and charged them with gaining revenge against the Greeks. Mattathias’ third son, Judas, took up the challenge and became known as “Judas the Hammer.” Judas led a revolt that recaptured some of the towns around Jerusalem and reclaimed the temple. As the Hammer entered Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, his followers welcomed him by waving palm branches. From that time forward, the palm branch became a symbol of independence for Jewish people—not unlike how national flags are viewed in our day—and at times, the image of palm branches was imprinted on Jewish coins.

200 years later, Jesus the Messiah, entered Jerusalem on a donkey, and He was greeted with the waving of palm branches along with a path strewn with clothes and palms, but Jesus entered Jerusalem, not as “The Hammer” but as “The Lamb.” To a world that valued violence, force, and power, Jesus came as the “suffering servant.” What implications does Jesus’ peaceful entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday have for us? And how does Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem impact how we treat others and how we represent God’s love to them?

I’d like to conclude today’s sermon by reading a passage from the Apostle Paul’s

letter to the 1st Century Church at Philippi, which beautifully captures Jesus' identity as the Lamb of God, the suffering servant, who gave his life that you and I might have life.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:1-11)