

“Blessed is the One”

Depths of Love – part #6, from umcsdiscipleship.org

Mark 11:1-11

[1-title slide] *Welcome, prayer.*

Liturgically speaking, today is not just Palm Sunday, it is also called Passion Sunday. According to the traditional calendar, Palm Sunday falls the week before Easter. However, my experience has taught me that many people do not attend Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services, and it feels a little strange to preach one Sunday, “Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey,” and the next week, say, “Jesus is risen from the dead!” The average person would be left scratching their head, asking, “Wait, how did he die? A donkey accident?”

The truth is, we need both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday to start us on the final journey to the cross.

[2-Children at 4th of July] I like parades. I have been in a few with marching bands in high school and college, including the Parade of Roses. Parades are fun: the lights, the sirens, the flag waving, and of course, the candy that gets thrown all over the place. People like to join these parades, or at least watch from the sidewalk.

[3-Protest march] There are other parades, however, that people are more reluctant to join. Not parades, but protest marches, like the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C. in 1963. Think of demonstrations against gun violence, war, and poverty. People are protesting not only in the US, but also in places like Russia, Cuba, and Haiti. These “parades” form in response to injustice. These rallies challenge the powers-that-be, demanding change. Nobody throws candy. People can be mocked and ridiculed for joining them.

I have been in more parades than protests, although I do remember an event in college called “Take Back the Night,” a rally against domestic violence and brutality against women. When you join an event like that, you need to carefully examine what you stand for. But more importantly, after the “parade” is over, you need to still be involved in the cause.

[4-Palm Sunday parade] Today I want us to ask, what kind of parade was Palm/Passion Sunday? What was the purpose of this trip to Jerusalem? And do we really want to join it, and stay with Jesus after it ends?

[5-Scripture] Jesus and his disciples started at the top of the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is a ridge just east of the Old City of Jerusalem, about 300 feet higher than the Temple Mount. The Mount of Olives is an excellent location to take in the panorama of the city. It is also religiously significant. The prophet Zechariah says in verse 14:4, “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley...” The Jews believed that the Messiah would appear on the Mount of Olives and march to victory in Jerusalem.

Jesus knew this scripture. He deliberately chose to enter Jerusalem from the east, declaring himself the Messiah. However, he also wanted to make clear what kind of Messiah he was. So he sent two of his disciples in to arrange for his transport.

[6-General Pompeii, white horse] If you want to display power in a parade, you choose a vehicle like a convertible, a firetruck, or a hot rod...those are all exciting because they have horsepower. Even today we see equestrian units riding in the parades. Why? Because horses are powerful, tall, and majestic. In biblical times, military leaders like General Pompey and Governor Pilate rode into Jerusalem on a white stallion with sword drawn.

[7-Jesus, donkey] Yet Jesus instead chose a donkey, a small, humble animal. Military leaders rode horses; messengers of peace rode donkeys.¹ Even the way the disciples procured the animal was a clue: Jesus told his disciples cryptically to go get a colt tied to a post somewhere in the city, and if they encountered any resistance (“Hey, what are you doing with that donkey?”), they were to explain that the Lord needed it and would return it immediately. By contrast, if a king needed a donkey or a horse, he would simply commandeer the animal, with little or no explanation.

Jesus made a political statement by entering the city from the east, riding a small animal that was the symbol of humility and peace. What a strange sight!

¹ Harper-Collins Bible Commentary, p 915.

Depending on the size of the donkey, Jesus might have been dragging his feet on the ground! He was not carrying a sword or leading an army. What sort of parade was this?

[8-Palm Sunday Jesus] The traditional view is Jesus made his “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem. That’s the paragraph title in my NIV Bible. After all, the people made a great show of respect for Jesus. They put their cloaks on the donkey, cut down branches to wave, and laid other branches and their coats in the street to keep the dust down. A happy little parade, right? This is the image we have of Palm Sunday. We even reinforce this idea of a pleasant, joyful parade in song: “Hosanna, loud, hosanna, the little children sang.” Happy day! Celebrate! Hosanna! That is one way to look at it.

Yet I submit to you, this was no Bridge Fest. One commentator writes, “There is no possible way to ignore the political implications of the act of Jesus Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.”² Another author, Charles L. Campbell, says the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a colt is “one of the wildest and most politically explosive acts of Jesus’ ministry.”³

[9-Palm Sunday, people] In many ways, Jesus mocked the political aspirations of the religious and military powers of his time. He did not climb a horse; Jesus sat on a heap of old clothes on the back of a donkey, with his legs dangling down to the ground. Why? Because Jesus identifies with the poor and meek. Jesus doesn’t just stand by them; he goes with them.

The people shouted Psalm 118, a song of thanksgiving after military victory. “Hosanna” means “God save us.” The people claimed the kingdom of King David was coming. This whole scene was building up in defiance of those in power in the capital of Israel, in the most powerful city in the Middle East.

[10-quote] Here’s a quote from Dawn Chessar that fits perfectly with my understanding of this day. “Jesus’ action...is not of a pretty parade scene with

² Dawn Chessar, www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/holy-week-2018-worship-planning-series/march-25-2018-passion-palm-sunday/passion-palm-sunday-2018-preaching-notes.

³ Charles L. Campbell, Exegetical Perspective on Mark 11:1-11 for Palm Sunday, Year B. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, WORDsearch Edition.

children smiling and laughing and singing and waving palm branches in a sanctuary. This action is political. It is bold. It is divisive. And it is deadly.”⁴

The enemies of Jesus took notice. This parade put into motion the events of Holy Week, the Passion of Christ, that got Jesus killed.

[11-Jerusalem wall] One last detail of this parade that surprises me, even confuses me. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, his followers hit a wall – literally, they entered through the walls of Jerusalem, and the parade ended abruptly. The crowd dispersed, and Jesus went away quietly. There was no storming of the temple. There were no fights to the death with the Roman soldiers, who were watching closely. Jesus did not enter the temple and offer a victory sacrifice. He simply looked around, and then left to go back to Bethany.

I said earlier, if you join a parade, you need to know what you stand for, and you need to be involved in the cause after the parade ends. Unfortunately, this Palm Sunday parade had a lot of fair-weather fans and passive bystanders. When Jesus entered the city, they left him. A few days later, some of them were shouting, “Crucify him!”, while others were running away.

[12-Jesus on the way to the cross] What would you have done? Would you have joined the revelers? Or would you have mocked them from the sidelines? Would you have understood what Jesus was doing? Would you have been prepared to challenge the powerful leaders of the day, following this rabbi who came riding on a donkey, who identified with the poor and oppressed?

There are many times when we get caught up in the excitement of an event, even a worship service. We start to think about how engaging the prayers are, how good the music is, whether or not we like the preaching. In other words, we get caught up in our own immediate gratification. When the buzz goes away, we move on to the next great fad. And when we do that, we miss the point of following Jesus.

[13-Jesus on the cross] Fortunately for us, Jesus knew exactly who he was and why he came. He never wavered from his mission. Jesus came to save the world by dying for us. His death on the cross conquered sin and brought eternal life to those who trust in him alone. That is a strange, crazy mission, and it is

⁴ Chessar, www.umcdiscipleship.org.

Jesus’. This is the king we follow, who turns the world upside down and turns our lives upside down.

Some people claim that the church should never be political. If by political, you mean “partisan,” then I agree. However, if by political, you mean, “involved in the actions that shape our society and our world,” then I have to disagree. From the beginning, the church has been a political movement, because it involved the people of God. The question is, do we join this movement, or not?

Jesus does not ask us to join a parade for a few moments or a few days. Jesus wants us in for the long run. Parades come and go. Jesus invites us on a journey, a marathon.

[14-crowd following Jesus] What about you? Do you fully accept the consequences of following Jesus? Will you stand up in the face of injustice? Will you identify with and serve the poor, the outcast, and the rejected? Or will you just go along with the crowd? The true impact of our decision will not be measured by the number of palms in our hands or the volume of our praises. Our impact will be measured by the number of people we welcome whose lives differ radically from our own.

[15-kneeling at the cross] We are called to follow Jesus. We are commanded to deny ourselves, carry our cross, and go where he leads. If we want to be serious about Easter, we will not only wave our branches and join the crowds, we will also get our hands dirty and speak up for those who have no voice. This is what it means to follow Christ.

[16-title slide] This week, we have the opportunity to continue the story past the parade. On Thursday night, we will recreate the Last Supper, when Jesus told his disciples plainly that he was going to die. On Friday, we will walk with a cross from Houghton to Hancock, not as a statement, not as a parade, but as an act of solidarity with our Lord, Jesus. Each of us will have the chance to feel what it is like to deny ourselves, carry our cross and follow him. Then at 7:00pm with our brothers and sister at First UMC, we will experience the Good Friday worship service, where we remember the pain and torture Jesus faced on the cross, in order to secure our salvation. Don’t just skip ahead straight to Easter, friends. Follow Jesus for the long haul.

In closing, I invite you to join with me in the prayer of the day.

Memory Verse: Matthew 16:24

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What was the last parade you participated in? What did it stand for?
2. When have you protested injustice?
3. Why do you think Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey instead of coming in a more powerful fashion? What does this say about the type of Savior he is?
4. What can you do to align yourself with the cause of the cross? How can the church identify with the poor and oppressed as Christ did?
5. What personal preferences are you willing to sacrifice to follow Jesus more fully?