

Nora Pederberg
March 28, 2021
Osler Mennonite Church

Palm Sunday:

Psalm 118:19-29; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

Good Morning Everyone,

Welcome to Palm Sunday. I thank you for joining into our service exactly as you are, with the resources that you have before you in order to join in the festival procession. I am somebody who loves a good metaphor or symbol so the church tradition of waving palm branches is something that has always warmed my heart. However, I think there is some teaching for me when I am stripped of my familiar rhythms and patterns that allows me to see things with new eyes.

When reading our Mark text for this morning I am struck by the way Jesus and the crowds simply used the resources that they had near by, whatever they had access to, and turned these everyday pieces of life into items of praise in this moment of Jesus' procession. Jesus borrowed a Donkey that was in the community, the disciples chucked their coats on top of the animal to try and make it a little more comfortable to ride. When crowds started following, they hadn't time to prepare for a coordinated entrance so they just started laying down the coats that they were wearing, and cutting down grains that were growing in nearby fields to wave in celebration. This procession was beautiful, but also very makeshift and unpolished and a little strange compared to what a normal processional might look like, even in biblical times.

With this in mind, I feel a special connection with that first Palm Sunday this year, even without all the familiar pieces that I love. We are using the tools and resources that we have around us and showing up to praise Jesus in our worship service, to form a crowd using Facebook, written resources, and sitting in the church building. We show up with masks in the sanctuary, or perhaps fuzzy blankets for those at home. We show up with all the pieces that make up our daily lives at this moment, just like the crowds who started following after Jesus on that donkey, and we enter into Holy week. So welcome, here to the festival procession.

It is tempting to get swept up in the momentum of the crowd, and bask in the excitement and anticipation of the people. Even if they don't have coordinated t-shirts, foam fingers, or clever cardboard signs. The group energy is contagious, and powerful – I mean without the crowd, this day is just the image of a man riding into town on a donkey, a fairly ordinary occurrence in biblical times. The crowd is what makes it a party. And yet, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus doesn't seem particularly interested in the spectacle aspect of the procession. Rather, his actions consistently strip the event of much of its flair instead of adding to it. Let's take a look.

Processions had a bit of a formula that they followed, and Jesus followed just enough of the steps to signal to everybody that this entrance was in fact a processional – but it was subversive. Shifting the pieces enough that commentators call Mark’s gospel procession a piece of performance art - leaving a message of who Jesus was and what he was going to do. The typical procession went as follows:

1. The elite figure approaches the city.
2. The local ruler and important persons would step in and lead the procession, escorting the elite figure in.
3. Crowds welcome in the elite figure, following them in with shouts, hymns, and decorations that usually carried some symbolism and ritual.
4. The local rulers would give speeches of welcomed, praising the new individual, linking their own status with that of the new coming
5. The elite figure would end the processional by going to the local temple and performing various rituals including prayers, sacrifice, and so on.

These processions served two purposes: they were a demonstration of power for this individual and they propped up the existing system, dividing clearly those with power and those without, demanding everybody play their part in ritual flattery and submission. Now when we compare this to what Jesus did, Jesus completely erases the role of the local elites.

Usually, the local elites would have their own honor and prestige heightened by participating in these activities, so by cutting out these parts, Jesus is clearly saying that he is not here to pump up anybody’s ego. This isn’t only true of the powerful in the city; right before the procession Jesus is telling the same thing to his own disciples, James and John, who are vying to have special recognition amongst Jesus’ followers. And directly after this story we watch Jesus curse a fig tree, for appearing to be nourishing but bearing no real fruit. Jesus has no time for performative acts of allyship, or jockeying for status.

This is emphasized in our Philippians scripture. **“Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Christ, though in the image of God, didn’t deem equality with God something to be clung to.”** Jesus actively took away the pompous grandeur that sometimes filled these marches and presented a much simpler, accessible image, where everybody was welcome to participate – but as equals. Jesus was not here to increase the power divisions, firmly leaving out the rituals that affirm a ‘power over model,’ showing that these actions had no place in the kingdom of God. Philippians emphasizes that if anyone had the right to flaunt their worth, it would be Jesus, but he didn’t.

He didn't take on the superstar image that even the crowds were hoping he would. Even the entry into the temple was anticlimactic. There was no big miracle or symbolic sacrifice or fire raining down from heaven. Jesus didn't start giving a long beautiful prayer or hymn, or even a sermon to the crowds. Jesus went in, looked around, and left. If we are looking at this march as a performative theatre piece, the symbolism of Jesus doing 'nothing' in the temple is the finale, is showing that 'nothing' comes from the traditional ways of exerting power or showing off.

We can see Jesus made clear what he wasn't, but this journey into Jerusalem also revealed to us who he is. Here is where we are going to get back to that donkey we talked about in Children's time. As funny as it might seem for many of us now, to walk up to a stranger and ask for their car because our teacher needs it – this was not as out of the ordinary for our biblical context. Occupying Roman soldiers routinely demanded the use of animals and human labor from the community. So, in Jesus doing this, he is taking on the actions of the ruling powers, asserting that he is the one that has dominion in this land.

However, there is an important distinction between the actions of the Roman soldiers and the actions of Jesus. Jesus gives his word that he will return the colt very soon. And immediately after Jesus' walk into Jerusalem he turns around and heads back to Bethany – which sits on the slope of the Mount of Olives, where earlier that day he borrowed the donkey. Jesus is fulfilling his promises to the people, big and small, proving himself to be faithful and worthy of trust.

Jesus' use of the donkey shows him as a leader who is rooted in the context of the community he is coming to save. He is using the local resources of the community but returning them, not depleting them. Jesus is choosing to mark his big entrance with actions of solidarity with this community. He is coming as a person of great power and influence and clearly demonstrating how this power should be directed. Jesus' work is providing a path of power 'with and for' all people, not power over them.

When I think about where I see these subversive demonstrations in our society today, I think of solidarity marches, vigils, and protests. I think about the difference between just showing up for that one moment and dedicating our lives to the journey of peace. Jesus rode into town knowing exactly how challenging the road ahead would be, that the easy praise from the processional crowd can quickly sour when a quick victory is not seized. Jesus is a powerful steady force, who exemplifies the consistent work of bringing forth a peace that invites us all to this journey.

I'm certain Jesus would show up for those public acts of solidarity, the marches, the vigils, that remind us that we are not in this alone. But I am also certain that the work would not stop there. Jesus continues on the journey, wading through the cycles of celebration and hardship to make known a love that remains at all times.

When I participate in Palm Sunday, I can get really wrapped up in imagining what it was like to be a part of that crowd. The rush, the anticipation, the belonging. Sometimes I forget that my example on how to engage in God's mission isn't in the crowds. It is calmly riding in on a donkey, showing us the steadfast presence of continuing to journey for peace, long after the momentum of the crowd has died away.

And with this image before us we are strengthened to continue our own journey into Holy Week, I invite you to take a deep breath as we center ourselves once more on our focus statement for this morning service: **[Breath]** **“As we follow Jesus into holy week, we sense the rush of the crowds and seek the deep, steady current of God's steadfast love, calling us to deep hope in the One who comes in the name of God.”** Amen.

Sources Used: New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Wisdom Commentary Series, Building the Strong Man by Ched Meyers, House for All Podcast, Leader Lenten Resources 2021.

Benediction *Adapted from 2021 Leader Lenten Resources*

Through the rush of the crowd, Jesus came.
The shouts swelled, blurred, and hurried, but he remained calm.
Go in the deep knowledge that the current of the crowd
was not the end of the story,
but led to a new beginning centered in deep hope.
May this hope of God remain with you always. Amen.