

## When Our Kingdoms Collide

*Mark 11: 1-10*

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup> and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” <sup>4</sup> They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup> some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” <sup>6</sup> They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup> Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup> Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup> Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

<sup>10</sup> Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Start with a bit of historical context. A little more than a century before Jesus entered the scene, Israel was not occupied by Rome, but by the Alexander the Great, the 5-star general from Greece. Toward the end of the Hellenistic era, just before the Roman era began, there was a great uprising among the Jewish people known as the Maccabean revolt. The uprising occurred because the Jews were being forced to assimilate to Hellenistic culture, being denied the rights to perform their rituals on their own soil. The revolt was successful and is still remembered today during the holiday of Hannukah.

Fast forward to Jesus’ time and Palm Sunday. The Roman empire was keenly aware of the Maccabean uprising. And to avoid a revolt against their occupation, they allowed the Jews to continue their holidays, such as Passover, but under careful supervision. During Passover they sent in reinforcements to the garrisons to make certain things remained under control. All of this hangs in the air as the Jesus leads the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem. We have to remember that Jesus is not only their anticipated king, but the general of their new army as well. A king and a general—same thing. It’s what Saul was. It’s what David was. So the crowd runs up to greet their new general, laying their cloaks on the ground, waving their patriotic palms, shouting “Hosanna, save us!” It is truly a triumphal entry. So here are a few thoughts to accompany us as we lean into Holy Week by following Jesus into Jerusalem.

The first is a confession: perhaps we rely too heavily on our leaders to save us. Over the summer, while driving in Florida down I-5, there were big billboards lining the highways which said, “Only God...and Donald J. Trump can save our nation!” And now that we are beyond

election season, some of us might feel a sense of relief, finding our bodies loosening up, because the way the election tipped saved our nation. When Covid-19 grazed our shores, we looked to our leaders for responsible guidance. Our governors had to make decisions on our behalf about curfews and occupancies. Health care organizations had to set guidelines and group us into phases for vaccines. The government, in attempt to save our economy, is sending out stimulus checks. Even in the Presbyterian church we have propped up leaders of color to high positions at General Assembly, with the hopes *and expectations* that their leadership will turn things around and save the church. The Palm Sunday crowd expects Jesus to save them—to implement just policies and overthrow occupation like the Maccabees did. Perhaps it is human nature to desire our leaders to save us.

Except we know where the story is headed. In a period of one week, hope slides into disappointment. The crowd scatters, his friends flee trying to save themselves. And the same crowd which shouted his praises, is now shouting, “Crucify him!” From their perspective Jesus is a phony, a fraud, a disappointment. And have we not felt that disappointment ourselves? When we are in the throgs of ongoing health issues and our calendars are full of doctor’s appointments, do we not look at Jesus and say, “Save us!” When there is another mass shooting, or another Black body is laid to waste on the pavement, does our grief not spill over as we cry out, “Jesus, save us!” When legislatures write bills which attempt to legislate our lives and the lives of people we love, do we not ask for saving? The ringing in God’s ears must be so loud. And don’t we sometimes wonder where is the God who said, “I have heard your cries.” Where is the God who said, “I will rescue you from the pit?” I mean, it often seems as if God is giving us the silent treatment, and even Jesus on the cross groans in desperate abandonment. It’s no wonder we look to human leaders to save us. We have all tasted the bitterness of hope sliding into disappointment.

But here lies the centerpiece of the gospel. What ultimately saves us, isn’t a person, but love. A love which keeps marching into the bowels of oppression while carrying the banner of justice. A love which keeps forgiving our spiraling ugliness while insisting there is still beauty in the world. A love which is grounded in the promise that although sorrow may last for the night, joy comes in the morning.

A couple of weeks ago I was at the mechanic. Car troubles. As I was reading a magazine in the lobby, I overheard a conversation two woman were having. One of them was talking about the recent death of her father a couple of months ago. He was in the hospital and she got the call that she would be allowed to be with him during his final moments. So she spent the night by his side in one of those stiff recliners. Then she had an urge to wake up in the middle of the night and check on him. He was beginning to stir restlessly, and then she said she heard a voice within her telling her to sit him up. And so she reached behind his back and raised him up. And then he simply leaned over, placing his head on her shoulder, as he died.

But the story kept going: After a long night of making phone calls and arrangements, and once she felt she could drive, she got in her car and began the journey home. And as she drove in the morning's grayness, there on the horizon was the beginnings of a pink and blue sky. The sun rinsing away the darkness. Painting the clouds like easter eggs. And as dawn's gentle curtain arose, she remembered the words her father would say to her every night as he tucked her in to bed. He'd gently kiss her forehead and say, "I'll see you in the morning, kiddo." The sorrow may last for the night, and it may feel like a long, long night. But joy...comes.

Jesus can't get to God's promise by going around what is coming, he must go through it. As do we. It's the centerpiece of the gospel: looking to love as our leader and to the God whose promise gentle kisses our ash-destined foreheads and says, "I'll see you in the morning, kiddo."