



## Method of the Opposition

**Mark 11:1-11**

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I remember as a child being marched through the sanctuary on Palm Sunday during worship. Our class followed instructions like every elementary school kid knows how – especially in church on Sunday morning – as we were paraded through the sanctuary while waving a single palm branch during the processional hymn. The organ wailed with great power, and the choir, a group of 50 or more belting adults leading the congregation in shouts of “*Hosanna*,” followed our class into the sanctuary.

When we reached the front of the room, we stood in anything but military precise rows, waving our branches with confused looks of forced glee on our faces. We knew Palm Sunday was a day of great pomp and circumstance. As yet, as children, we felt like we were on display – being offered as the jesters in the crowd, offering a church-pride-building side-show to the main event – the man riding into town on the colt of a donkey.

It’s interesting how the church has interpreted the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem that is associated with this final Sunday before Easter. It’s interesting, in part, because only one of the four gospel texts says anything about palm branches being present. Waving the palms seems but an afterthought in the text that we, as the church, have forced into the headline of the story to help us move more quickly out of the Lenten agony of repentance and penitence. We are ready for the Easter celebration, and the palms of Palm Sunday seem to offer a welcome reprieve and interjection of joy into an otherwise challenging span of 40 days.

Honestly, the whole of the Palm Sunday story is a bit odd. And our celebration of it, our celebration of Jesus’ entrance into the Holy City, seems a bit misplaced. It’s not misplaced because what Jesus is here to do isn’t worth celebrating ... for sure the passion-filled events of this week, while heart wrenching, are the precursor of greater things to come. There is joy that comes in the morning. ... But we often forget the crowd that cried “*Hosanna*” on Sunday is the same that cried “*Crucify Him*” just a few days later. By singing out “*Hosanna*” today, we are in effect admitting our participation in the very crowd that sought to have Jesus hung on the cross.

And yet, we willingly celebrate Jesus’ entrance with gleeful participation.

Consider again, if you will, this story, not as we recall it in the church so often today, but as it took place nearly 2000 years ago.

In Mark’s Gospel, we’re told after the transfiguration that Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem, naming to the disciples that his time was coming to an end. The events following that announcement have led to this heightened anticipation of what is about to happen in the Holy City.

Jesus and the disciples were approaching Jerusalem – they were just outside the city at Bethpage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives. It would be like Rosslyn or National Landing to DC. It was the first settled community outside the city limits.

Jesus said to two of his disciples, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter, you will find a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it to me. If anyone asks why you’re doing this, just tell them, “The Lord needs it and will send it back immediately.”

The disciples do just as Jesus requested. And, sure enough, as they entered the city, there outside in the street was a colt. As they began to untie it, some bystanders asked them, “Why are you taking that colt?” The disciples answered as Jesus instructed, and the bystanders allowed them to take it.

Before we get back to Jesus, can we just take a pause in this moment? There’s some oddities in this that we often just glance over in our rush to get to Jesus’ donkey-ride into town.

First of all, the colt that’s tied up: Where did this colt come from? How did Jesus know it would be there?

I mean, there’s some significance to the presence of the colt. The prophet Zechariah makes pretty clear that the entrance of the coming ruler of God’s people will come riding on a donkey. We looked at this text earlier this year. Zechariah 9:9-10 reads:

“<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
<sup>10</sup> He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

The presence of the colt doesn’t surprise me. Quite frankly, could Jesus really have been welcomed as the Messiah if he didn’t come riding on the colt, given the prophet’s declaration? ... But where did the colt come from? How did Jesus know it would be there? Had Jesus set things up with the locals in Jerusalem to ensure that the colt would be ready to go when he arrived?

Jesus also tells the disciples that if anyone asks, to simply say, “The Lord needs it, and will send it back.” This too is a challenging verse in this text, especially for Mark’s Gospel.

Mark uses this practice that we often call the *messianic secret* in his telling of the Gospel narrative. In Mark's Gospel, anytime someone correctly identifies Jesus as the Son of God, or the Savior, Jesus quickly tells them to not tell anyone. For example, in Mark 8, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah. Verse 30, offering Jesus' immediate response, reads, "And [Jesus] sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

So, given Mark's use of this practice of keeping Jesus' identity silent from the community, it seems odd that Jesus would openly declare, "the Lord" needs the colt. At the narrative level, "Lord" refers to God throughout the Biblical text. However, as Professor Lamar Williamson, Jr., points out, in the Greek, the word "lord" can also mean "owner."<sup>i</sup> Did Jesus somehow purchase this colt ahead of time? Did he ask the locals in Jerusalem to hold on to it until further notice? Was he simply reclaiming his own property for use on this ride into town?

Perhaps, but then why is he sending it back? Was he just borrowing it? There's so much here that just doesn't make sense. But perhaps that's part of the significance of the story. The haphazardness of it makes the story all the more noteworthy.

In reflecting on this text, the great reformer, John Calvin, notes, "It is not even his own [colt], but had to be borrowed. He has no saddle, so that the people have to throw their cloaks on the donkey's back. Those following him must have been a rag-tag, miscellaneous group of the poor. Hard to imagine anything less like a triumphant royal procession."<sup>ii</sup>

The story seems to check all of the necessary boxes for Jesus to be the royal leader of the Jews, but it certainly doesn't check any boxes beyond those necessary to fulfill the stories of old. He's riding a donkey: Zechariah – check. He's having people lay down cloaks on the road: II Kings – check. They cried out "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!": Psalms 118 – check. But there is nothing more triumphant about this ride into the city. Especially compared to what was likely happening on the other side of town that same day. This was the beginning of the week of the Jewish Passover.

The historical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, names that around this time of year, in preparation for the Passover when the Jewish pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem, Pilate would make an entrance into the Holy City as a way to remind the pilgrims who was in charge.<sup>iii</sup> Pilate's entrance would be filled with the militaristic triumph of a man trying to prove his strength, regardless how weak he might mentally and physically be. (It's amazing how such leaders don't change between passing millennia.) Pilate's entrance would have been accompanied by the war horse, chariot, and weapons on display.

Perhaps it is the entrance of Pilate on the other side of town that so quickly steals Jesus' thunder. Mark's gospel is unique from Matthew and Luke. All three gospels have Jesus going directly to the Temple after the donkey ride ends. When he gets there, Matthew and Luke have Jesus flipping the tables and causing a commotion that same day. Mark doesn't – Mark has Jesus go into the temple, take a look around, and then, as it was already late, head back where he came from. He went back to Bethany to spend the night with the disciples.

At first, I'm surprised by this quick shift in commotion and celebration. The crowd disappears so quickly, and they won't show back up. The cries of "*Hosanna*" go silent, at least until the cries of "*Crucify him*" begin to ring out.

But Crossan's explanation of Pilate's intimidation might offer some worthwhile elucidation.

To help us, I want to look at Dr. King's text in chapter 7 of *Stride Toward Freedom*. In the chapter, King talks about how, having realized the Montgomery Bus Protest was not going to end quickly, the city leaders and bus officials agreed to sit down with King and others to discuss how to end the protest. It was clear, even in their first meeting, that the city commissioners expected they could get their way without much of a challenge. But King and the other representatives of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was spearheading the protest efforts, stood their ground.

As the days waned on, the bus leaders and city commissioners tried many tactics to end the protest. They tried offering degrading compromises. They tried bullying. They tried stacking the committee. They tried intimidation. They tried lying – blatantly publishing false stories. Ultimately, they resorted to a show of physical strength.

With the ongoing protest, a number of the city leaders had joined the White Citizens Council of Montgomery, a group that, unlike the KKK in the 1950s, didn't hide their desire for white supremacy behind masks. Encouraged by their new association, the city leaders decided to embark on a "get-tough" policy to try and force an end to the protest. The city turned to the police to exert their power over the black community – arresting and jailing those assisting in the protest for the most minor, and often falsified, infractions. King himself was arrested – taken to jail for supposedly driving five miles over the speed limit.

Power, exerting power, displaying power, utilizing power, enforcing power.

Police cars and chariots have a lot in common. Their mere presence is a statement of power.

Jesus was riding in to town using a borrowed bicycle. Across town, Pilate entered the city with sirens blazing. One coming in humility, the other in a prideful show of force.

Are we really surprised that those who shouted "*Hosanna!*" quieted so quickly?

There's a reason Pilate rode into town the week of Passover, and it wasn't just because he knew the city was busting at the seams with Jewish pilgrims. Pilate knew that the focus during Passover was on God's redeeming presence. Pilate knew that the week of Passover was one that encouraged dismay at the current oppression and power structure of Rome. Pilate knew that Passover was about God's saving acts in the history of the people Israel.

As Jesus rode in to town, the pilgrims saw hope in the prophetic presence of the Messiah, entering into the city on the colt of a donkey. They saw hope in Jesus' presence. They cried out as he passed by in a most appropriate way, "*Hosanna! Hosanna!*" *Hosanna* means "save us." *Save us*. The pilgrims were

literally calling for Jesus to save them. It was the cry of the oppressed looking for freedom from the oppressor.

And yet, as they heard the commotion coming from the other side of the city, their cries for help quickly faded. Though they needed saving, they knew Rome would not stand for a challenger to Rome's power. They feared for their lives – they feared for the safety of their loved ones. They feared that the status quo might be upset. And, while not perfect, the status quo worked. It gave them the ability to own land, to have jobs, and to not be enslaved like they were in Egypt. Again, it was the week of Passover – the story of slavery and oppression was present at the forefront of their minds. So long as we are not their slaves, we can live with the oppression.

The cries of “Hosanna!” faded. They didn't even follow Jesus to the temple. And Jesus returned to the disciples in Bethany at night.

We are not unlike those who cried for help. We are not exempt from the crowd who looked to Jesus to save them, but turned from Jesus for fear of political retribution.

Jesus returned to Bethany that night, but he would show up back up at the temple the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that. He would show up every day, proclaiming the promise of God's redeeming love. He would show up every day, promising a new kingdom where oppression no longer maintained its force. He would show up every day, performing miracles that gave life to those whose life had been ignored. He would show up every day until the city officials had had enough, and then, for an insignificant and false accusation, they had him arrested. They had him arrested for being a “threat” to the powers that maintained their oppressive ways. They had him arrested for being “threat” to the status quo.

Friends, hear this good news, Jesus does not stand for the status quo. Jesus does not give in to the empire's grand display of power. Jesus shows up. Jesus speaks up. And yes, even when they took his life, Jesus raises up. So might we consider the invitation to not shut up, to not fade into the background with the rest of the crowds, but to speak up, to show up, to stand up, and to give voice the promise of God's love – the reconciling power of God's strength – the steadfastness of God's covenant – that justice shall reign, that truth shall stand above reproach, and that everyone might know God's great love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> William C. Plachar. *Mark: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Carl Gregg. “Jesus' Subversive Donkey Ride.” March 23, 2012. Patheos.com. Retrieved March 23, 2021.