



## **“The Parade Goes On”**

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Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Palm Sunday 2009  
April 5, 2009  
Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)***

### **ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE**

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today we join Christians around the world in celebrating Palm Sunday. Celebrations differ among Christians due to theological, liturgical, and cultural variations, yet our festivities are all based on a common story, which is Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The great German-American theologian Paul Tillich was famous for saying that if Jesus Christ came in our time, Palm Sunday would look more like a tickertape parade in Manhattan than a Palestinian Palm Parade. But palms were what folks had in those days and in that region, and the Palm Parade signaled that Jesus was not only a person of royal stature, but also a ruler who came in peace and whose kingdom would be marked by peace.<sup>1</sup>

All four New Testament gospels tell us that the first Palm Sunday parade occurred amidst the Jewish celebration of Passover, which was the commemoration of the Hebrews’ Exodus from slavery in Egypt.

Passover was and is one of the High Holy Days of the Jewish faith, and one of the great pilgrimage festivals that swelled the census of Jerusalem to many times its normal size.

In first-century Palestine, as now, the homes, shops, and streets of Jerusalem teemed with excitement and overflowed with people. Food, water, and sleeping accommodations were difficult to procure. It’s no wonder that Jesus and his disciples had to stay in Bethany rather than Jerusalem, and borrow a donkey for Jesus to ride on through the Holy City.

As he traveled that day, Mark explains that a sense of “emotional electricity” filled the air in Jerusalem, as spirits soared and the residents, merchants, and political and religious authorities attempted to meet the demands of a huge influx of pilgrims to Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Farley, “Theological Perspective,” on Mark 11:1-11, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 156.

Imagining ourselves as among that number on the first Palm Sunday, we sing together, verse two of hymn number 213, "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna."

**MUSICAL MEDITATION**

"Hosanna, Loud Hosanna" (v. 2)

**No. 213**

*From Ol-i-vet they fol-lowed a-mid a cheer-ing crowd,  
The vic-tor palm branch wav-ing, and chant-ing clear and loud.  
The one whom an-gels wor-ship rode on in low-ly state,  
And glad to see the chil-dren, slowed down the don-key's gait.*

**SCRIPTURE READING**

Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)<sup>2</sup>

Susan MacDonald

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 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. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

**HOMILY**

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When I was in college, there was a notorious week on the Greek calendar called "Hell Week." Even though I never pledged a sorority or fraternity, and even though Greek organizations were not as popular on my alma mater's campus as they are at some schools, the rest of the student body, staff, and administration were as aware of Hell Week as any week in the school year.

I wondered, even as a freshman: If the pledges knew beforehand what Hell Week would be like, would they have tried so hard to join their respective fraternities and sororities, or would they have taken a pass like the majority of the student body?

Dean Striggow, our academic dean, had a pretty clear sense of what the week would be about, even though some first-year students did not. So each year, he required the Greek Council to report to his office for a meeting prior to Hell Week. In that meeting, Dean Striggow, I was told, threatened the Greek leaders with expulsion, closure of the Greek houses, and revocation of their respective charters if the college experienced any vandalism or if any person was noticeably harmed by their notorious shenanigans.

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<sup>2</sup> Gold, et. al. *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1995.)

I won't go into a lot of detail about Hell Week at Lakeland College, because I'm sure that most of you have plenty of data from your own exposure to Greek life to personally illustrate my sermon for yourselves.

So I will simply say that there were a couple of near misses during my four years at Lakeland College when the question of whether Greek life would continue on our campus loomed large. As a consequence, there was more than one "GDI" (persons who didn't pledge) who like me wondered how many of those pledges would have rushed their respective fraternity or sorority had they known what the week ahead would entail.

### III

Regardless of whether any of us attended a residential college, regardless of whether our alma mater welcomed Greek organizations, and regardless of whether we paid any attention to the antics of Greek societies, I suspect that we all have had occasions when we have wondered, "Would I have signed up for x if I had known what the future would hold?"

As my high school algebra teacher, Mr. Eisenhower, would say, "Let's figure out what the value of x is."

What is x for you?

In other words, knowing what you know now, what might you have done differently in the past?

Knowing what you know now, would you have studied harder or worried less when you were a student? Would you have played the saxophone instead of playing baseball? Would you have chosen dance lessons over wrestling practice?

Knowing what you know now, would you have chosen love over money, or a more lucrative career that would have enabled you to provide more for your loved ones? Knowing what you know now, would you have clung to your initial vocation or chosen a new one? Knowing what you know now, would you have ridden out the merger, or taken the golden parachute?

Knowing what you know now, would you ask him to marry you all over again, or would you have left her earlier? Knowing what you know now, would you have chosen to become a parent or a stepparent? Knowing what you know now, would you have moved in with your children or bought into a retirement community?

Knowing what you know now, would you have invested in the stock market? Would you have purchased a new home? Would you have traded for that car?

Knowing what you know now, would you have chosen a better diet and more exercise? Would you have tried acupuncture instead of surgery, meditation instead of medication,

"The Parade Goes On," the Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring, 4/5/2009, p. 3.

or morphine instead of chemo? Would you have chosen hospice over the hospital, a prearranged memorial over last-minute arrangements, or a scattering over traditional burial?

Knowing what you know now, would you have done things differently than you had in the past? Would you have chosen a different approach? Would you have traveled a different path?

#### IV

Heaven knows that the Bible presents us with numerous stories where one wonders: If the protagonists had known the outcome described by the author would they have altered their behavior and dodged a proverbial “bullet” or contributed to a happier ending?

One wonders, for example, if the disciples had known that what we now call Holy Week was going to be the first-century equivalent of “Hell Week,” would they have fetched the donkey for Jesus, would they have marched in the parade, would they have huddled in the Upper Room, would they have tried to keep watch? Would they have followed Jesus to the cross? Would they? Perhaps not. Particularly if they had known the rest of Mark’s story.

Mark’s account of Palm Sunday and Holy Week takes a minimalist approach to the parade and offers a sobering account of Christ’s passion, depicting him as a controversial figure, and telegraphing his eventual rejection by the masses, his trial before Caiaphas and Pilate, and his imprisonment, torture, and execution at Golgatha.<sup>3</sup>

Mark’s account of Holy Week is grim. If the disciples had known on Palm Sunday what would happen by Good Friday, there might not have been a parade at all. But then, the gospel of Mark was no first-century version of the “Twilight Zone,” and Mark’s cast of characters couldn’t see into the future—especially not as far as Good Friday and beyond. They couldn’t even see the signs of the times.

#### V

The disciples’ predicament, of course, is the type of predicament that most of us find ourselves in at some point in life. We cannot, for a myriad of reasons, read the handwriting on the wall.

We miss the fact that Jesus asks for more than a passing commitment from us. We miss that he called his disciples to foster a different kind of community—one that was radically inclusive and mutually accountable. We miss that the ultimate victory march to

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<sup>3</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), pp. 201-202.

which we are called was not a Palm Sunday parade, but a walk to Emmaus with a Perfect Stranger.

If the disciples had known before Palm Sunday what they knew by Good Friday, they might well have skipped the parade and stayed in Bethany.

And if we knew only the Hell Week version of the Holy Week story, we, too, might skip the parade and get out of Dodge.

Fortunately for us, though, as Mark explains, Jesus knew all along what the future held and what would be required of him. Jesus knew all along that suffering and death were par for the course. He also knew that suffering was not his purpose, and that death was not his end. Jesus knew that Easter was on the horizon, and that the victory over doubt, denial, and despair had already been won.

One of the great blessings for our generation is that we live this side of the first Easter story, so it *is* possible for us to know now what Jesus knew then. It *is* possible for us to know that suffering is not our purpose and that death is not the end. It *is* possible for us to look ahead to next Sunday, like Jesus did, with a sure and certain hope that—regardless of whatever hell we may endure this week or any week of our lives—the victory over doubt, denial, and despair has already been won.

This is the good news of the gospel. The parade is just the beginning. The passion is not the end. Easter is on its way. Thanks be to God.

Amen.