

An Odd Parade
Mark 11:1-11, Psalm 118:19-29
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
March 28, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver



Do you remember this day? February 3, 2009. What an amazing celebration. The Steelers had beaten the Arizona Cardinals 27-23 only two days earlier, and the city was crazed! The temperatures were in the mid-twenties, there were snow flurries – but more than 300,000 people jammed into downtown to see the parade. Do you realize that’s about the same number of people that live in the entire city? Some of these people arrived at their spots before dawn.

The parade’s route was carefully planned, using the widest streets. There were more than 150 police to provide security, including some who rode horses and waved terrible towels. The Steelers themselves were totally engaged, cheering with the crowd. The one thing I can’t figure out is why Santonio Holmes, a young man who had not only won the Super Bowl Trophy but was named the game’s MVP, was listening to his iPod at that moment. What did he have to do that was more pressing, more satisfying, than this?

Do you remember Hines Ward leading the chant, “Here we go Steelers, here we go”? Or Troy Polamalu diving into the crowd and body-surfing? Or the fireworks that exploded overhead when James Harrison presented the trophy to the city? That was an amazing day.

I want you to think about, and to remember that day because Palm Sunday was nothing like it. We think we know something about parades, and when we read in Mark about Jesus taking part in a parade of sorts, well, we draw on our mental images. Forget it. It won’t work in this case.

For starters, there was no committee planning the route of this parade.

Heck, nobody knew that Jesus was coming, and most people didn't know who he was. Whereas Mike Tomlin was given a red Corvette convertible to ride in, and the players rode in high-end SUV's and pickups, Jesus rode into town on a colt. That would be the equivalent of a Yugo. Or a 1997 red Volvo station wagon. Jesus rode into town on an animal that was not trained to be useful in any fashion – not for war, not for farming – it was a humble, docile animal.

And in contrast to the throngs of people who gathered in town in the hours preceding the Super Bowl celebration, all of whom seemed to be wearing Steelers paraphernalia, the group that accompanied Jesus seems to be composed entirely of outsiders. Jesus is coming into town, all right, but it's with his entourage. These are not Jerusalemites eager to see the new king; this is a ragtag bunch of misfits, losers, and strangers who have banded around Jesus. While Mark doesn't mention many of them by name, we can assume that these people were there: Bartimaeus, the formerly blind beggar whom we met last week; Zacchaeus, at whose home Jesus had stayed in Jericho; Mary and Martha, Jesus' friends who lived in Bethany; Lazarus, their brother whom Jesus had raised from the dead; the twelve disciples, most of whom were from Galilee and who would have been out of place in the big city; and assorted other hangers-on who were hoping to see a miracle, get a free lunch, or see Jesus whip the Romans.

One similarity between the two events was that the crowd was singing. When pilgrims came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, as was happening here, they sang the Psalms. Outside of town, as they approached the city, they sang "The Psalms of Ascent" – Psalms 120 – 134. However, when they came close to the Temple, they sang Psalms 113 – 118, known as the "Hallel Psalms". Hallel is a Hebrew word that means "Praise". These were Psalms that were very heavily weighted with the people's expectations that God was here, that God was coming, that God would save, and that God would send a Messiah to release his people. The Hallel Psalms were often sung at coronations, and were thought of as royalty Psalms.

So I want to make sure we have the picture: Here is Jesus coming into town with a straggly group of followers – representing a variety of social classes and races. No one rushes out to meet him from the town, but instead, his followers are walking with him to the temple, certain that the man on the colt is the One that God will send to save the world. They are singing the Psalms about the savior, they are waving branches, they are reciting slogans that would draw the attention of both the religious establishment and the Roman Army that occupied the land.

All of this is going on around him, and what is Jesus doing?

Nothing. He is silent. For three years, he has been healing and teaching and confronting and challenging and resurrecting and forgiving. Today, he doesn't say a word.

Now, think about that, and compare it with the rest of the things we've

learned about Jesus in Mark. So far, what we've seen most frequently in Mark, is that Jesus rolls into a village and does something amazing – he heals someone, or gets into a religious dispute with the leaders – and a crowd gathers. Often, when he's done this, someone in the crowd will say, "Hey! I get it! You're the messiah, aren't you?" And almost always in Mark, when someone says this to Jesus, what is his response?

Shhhhhhhhhh. Don't tell anyone about me.

The events of Mark 11 are in some ways the direct opposite of Jesus' *modus operandi*. Here, he comes into town and doesn't do a thing. People acclaim him as the savior, the Messiah, the king. And he doesn't try to hush them or tell them they are wrong. He accepts their worship, even as he is sure that they are mistaken as to the kind of kingship he will display and the type of Messiah he will become.

Why is Palm Sunday important? What difference does it make to us that Jesus came into town on a colt and quietly accepted the worship of this ragtag little crowd that followed him along?

It seems to me that we become like the objects of our worship. The ancient Greeks worshiped the goddess Athena, and the town known as Athens came to be regarded as a center of wisdom – one of the traits associated with Athena. The Romans worshiped Mars, the god of war, and conquered the globe with their military machine. In our own day, the newspapers are filled with examples of people who worship power and eventually become corrupt; people who worship money and wind up greedy; people who worship youth and beauty and eventually fall prey to a fear of aging and death and a denial of what it means to be real human beings.

Do you see what I mean? We become like that which we worship.

Today, Jesus lets the crowd worship him. He accepts their praise and tribute. They may be all wrong about the kind of King he will become, but they couldn't be more accurate in their assessment of his role as God's chosen messiah.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into Jerusalem and he is quiet. He enters to town as a servant. A healer. A reconciler. He comes as a judge – especially as a judge in the Biblical sense of one who has the power and the authority to make things right – to sort things out so that the world becomes just and fair and true.

The people who lived in Jerusalem didn't know that Jesus. Most of the people who were picking up the song of Psalm 118 that day hadn't entirely figured it out what Jesus yet, either. But Jesus accepts their worship, and invites them to follow him more deeply into the week that lies ahead.

I think that sometimes we forget that the events described in the Gospel of Mark happened in the days before cable news and the internet. People heard bits

and pieces of stories, and they rushed out to see for themselves what was going on.

We have the perspective of 2000 years with Jesus. We know who he was, where he was from, and what he was doing far better than most of the people who were present that first Palm Sunday.

But I still face the temptation to turn Jesus into who I want him to be, rather than allowing him to reflect God's light and wisdom into my life. Go home today and turn on the television, and you'll see that there are any number of disciples who cry out to Jesus because they think that calling him is the best way to become rich, or skinny, or happy.

If we read a little further in the gospels, as we will this week, we'll see that some of the same people who were singing Psalm 118 to Jesus on Sunday were calling for his execution in Thursday. That's not surprising. Jesus – especially the Jesus who we hope makes us rich, skinny, and happy – is often a disappointment.

But look with me at the disciples for a moment. Last week, I pointed out that when the followers of Jesus encouraged blind Bartimaeus to stand up and move towards Jesus, they were doing the absolute right thing. After a few years' worth of getting it wrong, they got one right.

Well, later this week we'll see that they aren't quite finished getting it wrong yet, but this morning we see two more examples of them getting it right.

In verse 4, when he is giving them the instructions about going into the village to get the colt, it's pretty clear that they have no idea what he's talking about. But look at what it says: "They went away and found a colt..." They didn't fully understand what he was asking him to do, or why, but they did it. And since I've been quick to point out where the disciples have blown it, I need to say something when they do it right.

And they are on a roll today, because look at the last verse of the passage: at the end of this day, after all of the crowds had found someplace to go, Jesus took a look around town and then he went back out to Bethany "with the twelve". Now surely the disciples must have had a variety of opinions as to what Jesus could or should have been doing in order to capitalize on the momentum that he seemed to be building. Surely, they must have had some critique as to the way that he seemed to be letting this golden moment pass by in silence. But they didn't say anything. They just stuck close to him. Just as Bartimaeus followed him "on the way" last week, so too his disciples follow him this Palm Sunday.

I'd like to follow him, too. My motives are not always pure. My heart is not always right. But I want to be where he is. He is what God intends for each of us. And so I hope that we, like the twelve, can follow him to Bethany and beyond, and that we might not stop our worship or our praises as things get complicated. Because if we follow, and if we worship, then maybe we, too, can become servants who are generous and forgivers who are committed to reconciliation;

maybe we might become more interested in the truth than we are in being right, or more interested in getting things done than we are in getting credit. If we follow Jesus, and worship, maybe we can join him in looking at the Father and saying, "Here I am, God. Use me."

It's easy to join the crowds who back a winner. It's fun to go out and scream with your friends, whether you are excited about having "one for the thumb" or because you think that the new king might give you a cushy spot in the new world order.

But today, let's remember the silence of Jesus. Let's allow that reserve to compel us to follow him. By his grace, may we know him not only in triumph, but in his crucifixion; may we know him not only in life, but through death and into resurrection. May we know his humility and his strength. And as we know it, may the world around us get a glimpse of it, too, for Jesus' sake. Amen.