

“March Madness”

Mark 11:1-11

Preached from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Palm/Passion Sunday, 25 March 2018
Matt Matthews

Mark **11:1-11** When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples **2** 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. **3** If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” **4** They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, **5** some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” **6** They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. **7** Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. **8** Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. **9** Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! **10** Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

11 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.

Sixty four teams have been on a journey to the final four... Green things are poking through the brown beds in our backyard. Buds are yellowing or turning red. Just as things are beginning to bloom, sleet and snow are driven sideways into our windows scratching out yet another movement in Winter’s song. March madness . . .

We are on a journey through these seasons.

Today is the first day of what we call Holy Week. We commemorate the final week of Jesus’ earthly life. Today, it’s a parade of palms as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Thursday we’ll gather in this sanctuary for what we call Maundy Thursday services; we’ll remember the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples. Friday, we gather with the Methodists across the street for a noon service remembering Jesus’ crucifixion. These midweek services are somber ones. Last Supper. Desperate prayers. Betrayal. Crucifixion. But today and next Sunday are joyous days: Today a parade. Next Sunday, resurrection. We are on a liturgical journey this week, walking closely, so closely, to Jesus on this Holy Week.

But the journey of faith is broader and longer than just one week, no matter how holy. I arrived 53 days ago as your new pastor. I’ve worshipped with you for nine Sundays. We’ve gathered for five funerals. Committees have been meeting. Prayers have been praying. Workers have been working. Dreamers have been dreaming. Singers (thank you choir!) have been singing.

We’ve been a long way already in our journey together. We’ve covered lots of ground. And we have miles to go, thank God. Miles to go.

I’m looking forward to where else the journey may take us. In several weeks, Mission Possible is going to Kemmerer Village to repair that great facility. Want to go? They can make space for you. Our Senior High youth are heading for a week of mission work at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center in Little Rock. Some of us are going to the General Assembly of our denomination to doze through long meetings and to do the work of the larger Presbyterian church. Some are going to Cuba soon to spend time with our partner congregation there.

With Jesus, we are on a journey. We are on a journey together.

The road has twists and turns, highs and lows. We'll be gathering at hospitals and dinner tables, ball fields and boardrooms, concerts and coffee shops, ice cream parlors and funeral parlors. Winter may even relinquish its grasp on us all and we'll meet each other in our gardens with snap peas flowering over our heads like crowns—or halos. And if summer ever comes, we might slather sun block on each other's sunless shoulders and go swimming together.

Close your eyes and imagine where the road will take us.

G.K. Chesterton wrote that "Every man who has ever knocked on the door of a brothel was looking for God." Is that what stirs us to take to the road? Are we simply looking for God?

The good traveler asks questions before setting out: Do we have enough provisions? Are we rested? Did we pack the cheese nabs? Will the weather cooperate?

* * *

Jesus must have asked questions himself before setting out for Jerusalem. Do I have the provisions I will need? Is this trip to Jerusalem even worth the trouble?

His answers we can only presume were "Yes." He closed his eyes and thought of the faces of all the people he had met along the way. The teachers and others who strived after righteousness, but who missed the mark. The sick, the lame, the wondering. He closed his eyes and remembered them all: the rich, the foolish, the spiritually blind, the gays the straights the crooked, all the sinner-saints he had met along the way. They wore broad smiles. They smelled of fish. They glowed with fever. They trembled with gratitude. Their eyes shown with wonder, hope, and awe.

And he said, "Yes, the journey to Jerusalem is worth it. Because they are worth it; these lovely children of God whom I was sent to love are worth it. God's plan to redeem creation? Worth it. God will use me in a way that will be eternally worth it."

And so, Jesus got on that borrowed donkey and descended from the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley, beneath the shadows of the towers along the Jerusalem wall, into the gate and up the temple mount.

The crowds waved cloaks and branches. They shouted, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It was a rowdy celebration. But it spelled danger, too. Jesus is lampooning every dignitary who rode into that town behind a warhorse in a chariot. His "military procession" mocks the generals and the Caesars of the day. His army is the heavenly host, and the rag tag group of followers waving branches; and his general is the creator of the cosmos. He is inviting people to follow his upside down order. He is inviting everyone to rethink what they pay their allegiance to.[\[1\]](#)

So, the "king of fishermen, tax collectors, Samaritans, harlots, blind men, demoniacs, and cripples" rode a borrowed donkey into Jerusalem. One commentator calls this "the moment [on] which the wheel of history would turn."[\[2\]](#)

We don't call it Holy Week for nothing.

This is the one with whom we share the journey. Jesus is the one. On this journey we endeavor to care about the things he cared about, to look at things the way he looked at things, to value the things he valued.

We aren't sure this side of Jordan where it will lead. We don't know how things will work out. We don't know when we will arrive.

We follow the man who rode a borrowed donkey into what remains one of the most antagonistic regions of the world. We don't know the way, but Jesus does. "I am the way," he said. "And the truth, and the life."

We follow Jesus because we know, whether we stand well or long with Jesus, Jesus will stand by us.

The journey will take us so many places. But today, the journey takes us to the roadside by the city gate. We watch, clap, dance, wave our palm branches, and spread out our coats before him. Our Lord is on a donkey and has descended from the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley, beneath the shadows of the towers along the city wall, and entered into a city named Jerusalem.

And we are hoarse with singing: Welcome Jesus! "Welcome Jesus! Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

AMEN

[\[1\]](#) Jesus comes riding into town, "his feet possibly dragging on the ground . . . not as one who lords his authority over others, but as one who humbly rejects domination. He comes not with pomp and wealth, but as one identified with the poor. He comes not as a mighty warrior, but as one who is vulnerable and refuses to rely on violence. Jesus here takes the role of a jester, who enacts in a humorous, disorienting way a totally different understanding of 'rule' and invites people to see and live in the world in a new way." [See Campbell, p. 157, *Feasting on the Word*, year B, vol 2].

[\[2\]](#) Campbell, *ibid.*

Feasting on the Word (Westminster/John Knox) and *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdo Press) are vital resources in my preparation of every sermon.