

“Unbroken”

Mark 11:1-11

Scott Black Johnston

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York

Throughout the season of Lent, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church has been asking “What lessons have we learned in the midst of the pandemic? Will the experiences we have had over this past year change us? Or will we revert to ‘normal’ as soon as we possibly can? What sort of people do we want to be in the aftermath of this challenging time?” These questions follow us into Holy Week. Today we ask “What sort of world does Palm Sunday call us to embrace?” Let’s keep that question in our mind’s eye as we listen to one of the classic texts for today, as found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter eleven, beginning with the first verse:

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus 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.

It has been another violent week in America. News from across the country has left many of us feeling weary— weary and numb. The visuals coming out of Boulder strike us as too tragically familiar: pictures of hunched-over people running from a building, a snapshot of police officers standing around a podium, the stock photo of an AR-15 assault rifle, thumbnails of victims’ faces lifted from Facebook pages, videos of flowers piled against a chain link fence. At times these shootings feel inevitable—unstoppable. Only a few days earlier, the clergy of this church sent out a letter and a prayer addressing the shooting in Atlanta. Should we send out another one? A deflated response flashed through my mind, “What’s the use?”

My colleague, Reverend Kate Dunn, wisely observed that one of the good things about the pandemic has been fewer mass shootings. I nodded. These terrible events are not something we want to resume. They are not one of those parts of our common life—not an aspect of the typical ebb and flow of America—that we want to

revert to “normal.” It should also be said, as we bear witness to these gut-wrenching events, that there is a place, at the heart of our faith, where God stands in remarkable solidarity with those injured and killed in Atlanta and Boulder. We are poised, today, on the front edge of Holy Week. We are about to journey down Christianity’s most revered path. We know what to expect. We know our faith is about to put violence center stage. As we stride toward Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we cannot help but wonder if the One who first walked this path, who walked this path for us, has something to say (something to offer) to a world that remains in thrall to such violence.

The Palm Sunday story, as Mark tells it, starts in a sort of quirky fashion. As Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem, he dispatches two disciples to secure a ride. He gives them instructions. Jesus says, “Go into the next village. There you will find, tied to a hitching post, a colt that has never been ridden. Bring me that colt. If anyone asks: ‘Why are you untying the creature?’ just tell them, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

So, the disciples go. Sure enough, they find the colt. And sure enough, someone says, “Hey, why are you untying the colt?” The disciples respond, “The Lord needs it.” Those simple words allay the bystander’s fears: “This is not horse thievery. This is God’s work. Be off with you!” And with that, Christ’s followers go on their way. Palm Sunday starts out in a calm and courteous fashion. It doesn’t stay that way. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, people begin to whisper. They point. They see something that stirs their spirits. They get excited. They start throwing their clothes in the street. Before long they start shouting—singing—dancing! “Don’t let the little colt scuff his hooves.” “Clear the way! Messiah on board!”

Everywhere people throw open windows and hoist homemade signs: “Romans go home!” “Street Sweepers for Jesus!” Along the parade route, people chant. They repeat, of all things, Bible verses—verses from the Psalms. They cry out, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming of the King—the ancestor of David.” It is a rally. It is a march. The people of Jerusalem swirl around the rider at the center of their parade. “Let’s put this guy on the throne. Let’s make him ‘king.’”

Of course, a designation like this comes with some risk—especially when there already is a king. The current wearer of the crown, Herod Antipas, and the true power in Jerusalem, Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, strolling around in his mirror-polished armor must have noticed this spontaneous parade, must have heard the reports. You can almost picture their cynical smiles: “Isn’t that cute? The Passover crowds have named someone ‘king.’ Let’s prepare a fitting welcome for this new ruler—a special crown for the new king.”

Oblivious to their cold-blooded scheming, the crowds press on. Caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment, tired of business as usual, willing to take small risks to thumb their noses at the Roman troops, the people shout and cavort. They act like things are about to change.

As my friends in the south would say, “Bless their hearts.” The crowd have no idea what is about to come. And what’s more, they don’t know Jesus. Not really. Jesus was never going to turn out to be their kind of king.

These folk don’t want a peacenik riding an untamed colt. Go ahead. Ask them. Ask them later, that same night, after the buzz of the moment has worn off. They don’t want Jesus. Not really. They want a warrior. They want a rebel commander

who will overthrow the Romans. They want someone who can go toe to toe with the big spears and warhorses. Before the week is over, the crowds will give voice to this sentiment. When given a choice between a brutal bandit and gentle Jesus, they will chant: “Give us Barabbas!” This is why, on Palm Sunday, I typically counsel: “Don’t trust the crowds.” It’s fairly conventional advice. After all, crowds are fickle. Crowds change their minds. And crowds in the Good Book (and in life) often end up being mistaken when it comes to Jesus.

On Palm Sunday, the Gospel of Mark tells us that the streets of Jerusalem were full of people running around, yelling slogans, all while tossing palm branches and articles of clothing on the ground. It is pure chaos. Into this chaotic scene, Jesus rides an animal that has never been ridden before. This young colt doesn’t buck. It doesn’t kick. It doesn’t scrape off its rider on a wall and race for the hills. Something unusual is happening here. It is something that a country mouse might notice more quickly than a city mouse. The Jesus we meet on Palm Sunday is a horse whisperer.

One of my colleagues at the Presbyterian seminary in Austin, Texas, was the New Testament scholar, John Alsup. John taught students the Gospel of Mark by day, and in the evening he went home to manage a small horse ranch. One Saturday, John invited me out to his ranch to meet a relatively new colt—Maverick. Only a few months old, Maverick was full of vinegar. As we approached the paddock, he rolled his eyes. He raced round and round the enclosure, kicking and snorting. Maverick was a wild creature.

I watched John take a handful of oats, an apple, and a coil of rope and climb into the paddock. The colt raced toward John. Abruptly, he skidded to a stop, whirled around and scampered away. As this four-hundred-pound tumble weed cavorted, my friend John stood very still. He spoke softly. And eventually, cautiously, Maverick walked toward him and nuzzled his arm. John fed the young horse. He ate—a handful of oats and the apple. As he ate, John lay the coil of rope across the back of the colt’s neck. He wasn’t restraining Maverick, but the horse could feel it. He was learning not to fear the rope. He was learning to trust John. I leaned against the fence in awe. It was one of the most gentle things I have ever seen.

There is gentleness like this at the heart of Palm Sunday. Jesus enters the holy city astride an unbroken colt—an animal that has never been ridden. It has never known the weight of human on its back, never had heels dug into its sides, never felt the sting of a whip. Mark describes Jesus riding through Jerusalem on this unusual steed. Weaving through the streets of this violent city, this city that kills its prophets, Jesus looked at everything, says Mark. He looked with loving eyes on all of Jerusalem’s people. He looked with compassion on a populace full of pain, swimming in fear, at a loss to fix the broken places in their lives—places where they could not seem to piece things back together: the fractured relationships, the shattered dreams.

Watching Jesus ride through the streets on his unusual steed—watching this gentle, humble man peer at them with eyes brimming with love, the people of Jerusalem lose their cookies, their restraint, their sense of dignity and propriety. They start to yell. They gasp, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

There are many times in the Gospels (and in life) when the crowds are wrong, but you know what? I have decided Palm Sunday is not one of them. For a brief moment that day, I think the crowds were right. When Jesus rides into town, they look at him astride this colt, gentle and humble of heart, gazing on Jerusalem with compassion,

and they say, “Yes. Yes. Finally... YES. Maybe he is the one! What one? The king. The messiah! The one who will save us.” At that moment, at that brief, but crystalline Palm Sunday moment, the people’s hearts kick every other possibility to the side, and they shout, “This is the king we want. This is the ruler our hearts seek. This is the vision we want to build society around. Enough with the politics of hatred, the fear-mongering, the sewing of mistrust between race and class. Enough with violence. Enough with the god-awful, hate-fueled, life-robbing, family destroying, hope smashing violence. We want something different. We want this. We want gentleness, humility, and love to reign over us.” They wave their palms. They shout their deepest hopes. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” For once, the crowd gets it.

Does the crowd stay convicted? Do they hang onto this vision? No. Between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the crowd gets nervous. We get worried too. We don’t become cynics. Not completely. We become “realists.” Let’s call it that. We are realists. We start thinking about how messed up things really are. Sure, this Jesus fellow seems nice and all that, but when you get down to it, he is probably too humble, too gentle, and too doggone fixated on love for this mean old world.

It doesn’t take long and it doesn’t take much. The Palm Sunday crowd will abandon both their ideals and their ideal ruler. They will give up on their hopes for a different world, and they will turn their backs on the ruler their souls once yearned to put on the throne. They will forget this crystalline moment. They will cry out for a bandit. Maybe this is inevitable. But before we lapse into defeatism, before we shake our heads at the futility cycle that now includes Atlanta and Boulder, Palm Sunday begs us to linger for a bit. You say you are looking for God? You say you want to find the sacred? “Well,” says Palm Sunday, “you are in luck. God is waiting for you here, right here, deep in your gut, in that place inside of you that yearns to sing: ‘All glory, laud and honor.’”

“Humans have the capacity,” says Palm Sunday, “to get it right.” We have the capacity to catch heaven’s vision, to push past entrenched anger and fear, and to embrace a different way. It is there in our heart of hearts. It is there in that place inside of you willing to be a fool for love. It is there whenever a shout of joy cannot be restrained. It is there when tears of possibility run down your face.

“Listen to that part of yourself,” says Palm Sunday. Listen to the part of yourself that longs to run alongside a gentle man and his untamed horse. That’s your invitation to stand in the holy of holies. That’s your run alongside God moment. That’s your chance to shout to the world that the real king doesn’t wear polished armor. The real king doesn’t look like that at all.

As we head into Holy Week, please join me in affirming our shared faith, using an adapted portion of *The Nicene Creed*:

For us and for our salvation
Christ came down from heaven:
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

For us. For our salvation. For our sake.