

A Sermon for Palm Sunday, Year B
April 1, 2012 :: Mark 11:1-11
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“Shall I Draw You a Picture?”

At the very beginning of this service, even before we sang our processional hymn, we heard the Gospel of Mark’s description of how Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem. If you recall, this is how it was described:

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” and “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” (Mark 11:8-10)

Now, at first blush, it would seem as though all of those people were finally on the same page as Jesus: he’s making a very public entrance into Jerusalem, and the people are cheering wildly. And even today, we still refer to this event as “the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.” So, it seems as if everything is finally coming together for Jesus.

However, if you were to read the earlier chapters in Mark's gospel, you would see a different picture altogether. You would see that the author of Mark's gospel has woven a recurring theme throughout his text, and that is the outright inability of the people – including the disciples – to understand who Jesus is, and what he came to do.

For his part, Jesus wanted his ministry to be characterized by servant-hood. However, the people wanted him to be their king. And even though we have just heard how the people shouted and cheered for Jesus, as he entered Jerusalem, it's not because they finally understand who he is and what he's all about. No, the people still want Jesus to be their king. They still haven't put the pieces together. And, very often, neither have we.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone, where it seemed like you were just talking past each other? You know, it's like you're saying one thing, but they're hearing something else. That happens to me on occasion, and especially when people ask me for directions to some place. And, as often as not, I'll simply say: "Listen. Why don't I just draw you a map." Well, Jesus did that a lot. When people couldn't seem to understand what Jesus

was saying, he'd draw them (not a map, but) a picture. And, by that, I mean that he would let his actions do the explaining.

For example, when Jesus fed the five thousand, he was demonstrating God's power to meet people's needs. But the people didn't understand that. When Jesus calmed the storm, he was demonstrating God's presence with people in times of trouble. And still the people didn't get it. And, even when Jesus asked the disciples "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's answer contained all the right words, but what Peter had in mind was entirely different from what Jesus was trying to communicate.

So, when Jesus was planning his entry into Jerusalem, I think he knew that the people still didn't fully understand who he was or what he was about. But it wasn't for lack of trying, because Jesus had painted a lot of pictures for them. He had healed the sick – that was one picture. He had brought sight to the blind – that was another. And he had fed the hungry. Time and time again, Jesus tried to show the people that, in his role as Messiah, his purpose was to be a servant who brought healing, and restoration, and deliverance. And yet, the people still wanted a

dynamic leader, a warrior, someone to help them overthrow the Roman government.

So, as Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem, he realized that he needed to draw yet another picture for the people. It had to be a dramatic picture, and unmistakable in its meaning. And for his inspiration, Jesus looked to the words of the prophet Zechariah, who wrote:

Rejoice, O daughter of Zion! Shout! Your king comes to you – triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Even though it seems simple enough, the truth is that most of us misunderstand the imagery of someone riding on a donkey. And that's because what donkeys mean to us, is completely different from what donkeys meant to a first-century Palestinian. We tend to think of donkeys as being dumb and stubborn, and that no self-respecting hero would be caught dead riding one, because they'd look ridiculous.

But in first-century Palestine – which was a land known for its rocky terrain, and for its hills, valleys, and narrow passes – the animal of choice for getting around was not the noble horse, but the humble donkey. And, what’s more, in those days, donkeys were a symbol of peace. If you were planning to go to war, you rode a horse. But if you wanted to convey a message of peace, you chose a donkey. And that’s just what Jesus did.

So, do you see what Jesus is doing? He’s going to Jerusalem. And, yes, he’s going as the Messiah, as the promised deliverer from God, but he’s going humbly, meekly, and in peace. But that wasn’t what the people were looking for. They wanted someone to help them defeat their enemies. And they were looking to Jesus to be the one to do that. And so, when they saw Jesus, they shouted “Hosanna.”

Now, “Hosanna” is an interesting word. When it’s used in a liturgical setting like our’s, it’s simply a shout of praise. But, in the setting described by Mark’s gospel, “Hosanna” served two functions. On the one hand, it was certainly a shout of praise, but, on the other hand (when you look at the original Greek tense of the word) it’s also a command which essentially means “Save us!”

or – and more in line with what the people were expecting – “Take your sword and save us from Rome,” or “Crush our enemies!” Something like that.

Even though Jesus had drawn them a perfectly good picture, they still didn’t get it. Had Jesus come to save them? Yes. But would he do it by spilling Roman blood? No. Their freedom, their deliverance, their salvation, would not come by spilling Roman blood, but rather by spilling a Messiah’s blood.

And so, the account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, stands as yet another example in Mark’s gospel of misunderstanding and blindness. It’s another example of people who stubbornly hold on to their own ideas of justice, who pursue their own paths towards deliverance, and who work out their own plans for salvation; rather than trying to understand, and submit to, the will of God.

How many times have we asked God to destroy our enemies? How many times have we insisted that God rescue us from our difficult circumstances? And how many times have we demanded that God grant us justice ... but justice on our terms? And what does God do? He just rides that donkey, that symbol of peace, not

saying a word. And if we'd stop our thrashing about for a moment, and really looked, we just might see where he's heading; we might see that he's heading towards Jerusalem, and towards the Cross.

And on a hill outside of Jerusalem, Jesus would draw a final picture for us. And on that canvas, there would be two broad strokes: one between heaven and earth, and the other across the world. And at the intersection of those two strokes, there we would see the blood-soaked face of the Son of God.

The donkey notwithstanding, Jesus did come to wage a war. But it wasn't a war against the Romans. Rather, it was a war against the principalities and powers of this world; it was a war against the hopelessness and helplessness that imprison so many people; and against the sin and selfishness of this, and every, age. His weapon of choice was not a sword, but a cross, and his plan wasn't to take a life, but to offer a life.

"Jesus on the Cross" was the final picture to be drawn by our Lord. It was a picture that seemed to suggest defeat, but in truth it was a picture painted in the colors of victory. It was a horrible death, wrought by violence, but it was a death that would usher in

a new era of peace. And on a Friday afternoon, in the darkened skies over Jerusalem, the Light of God shone with a new brilliance.

And so, on this Palm Sunday, we are reminded that, although Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, he left with a Cross. That is, we are reminded that Jesus came to his destiny riding a symbol of peace among men; but what he left us with, was a symbol of our peace with God.

Amen.