March 25, 2018

Mark 11:1-11

In the Wilderness: Together

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 11:1-11 New Revised Standard Version

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.

 I like to sing. When I was in college I sang in a Gospel Choir and we would sing and dance and it was awesome! My favorite song that we sang was “Ride On, King Jesus, Ride On.” I always think of that song on Palm Sunday. This is such a joyful day with the kids waving palm leaves and hopefully not hitting each other in the face. We can imagine Jesus on a colt or a donkey, the Bible says Jesus was on both, trudging into Jerusalem, people waving their arms in the air, tattered coats thrown down before Jesus as he marched toward his death. This Palm parade is really a funeral procession. The palm frond is actually used as a symbol of martyrdom in Christian art. In paintings it is used to show that the saint in the painting earned their status through death.

 In Jesus’ day, travelers were coming to Jerusalem from all over for the festival of Passover. Children were running around, and families were making the preparations for the Passover meal. They had to get an unblemished lamb for the sacrifice and they had to get the correct herbs and spices. In most of Mark’s telling of the event, Jesus is making preparations as well. We get all of these details about a particular village and a particular colt. Jesus gives the disciples the script of what to say. Six of the eleven verses in Mark are focused on the details of the preparation. It seems like this parade wasn’t just a case of Jesus happening to be in the right place at the right time. Maybe Jesus was being purposefully provocative.

 You see, that day in Jerusalem there was another parade as well. The Bible doesn’t talk about this other parade, but historians do. Throughout the first century, Rome always staged an imperial parade in Jerusalem at the time of the major Jewish festival of Passover. Passover was the religious festival that celebrated the Jewish people’s liberation from their earlier Egyptian oppressors. Rome had occupied Israel for almost one hundred years and they wanted everyone in Jerusalem to know that Rome had the political and military power of the empire. Rome wanted to make sure that there were no ideas that the Jewish people could be or should be free from oppression again.

 Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, led the imperial parade each year. Pilate would come from the west riding into Jerusalem on his war horse leading the imperial cavalry and soldiers. The crowds that gathered would see big strong horses, foot soldiers, helmets, weapons, banners, and golden eagles mounted on poles (Borg & Crossan, “The Last Week”, p. 2). As the people watched, they knew who had control over their lives and deaths.

 The crowds who saw Jesus’ parade saw a man coming from the east, sitting on a donkey/colt. The Jewish people’s minds would have been reminded of the prophet Zechariah and the promise of a God-given kind for Israel who would banish war from the land and command peace to the nations (Zechariah 9:9 & Matthew 21:5). Surrounding Jesus was a ragtag group of ordinary men and women in everyday working clothes. They didn’t display power but they did display devotion. The crowds watching showed their devotion to Jesus as well.

When the crowds were watching Pilate’s parade, they were silent and intimidated, but with Jesus’ parade, they took off their cloaks and spread them on the road ahead of Jesus. They cut leafy branches and shouted “Hosanna, Hosanna,” which is a Hebrew word that is a cry for God’s help and deliverance. It means, save us, save us now. The people were filled with joy and also a deep desperate desire to be saved from their oppression under Rome, saved from being unable to imagine a different kind of future for their children, saved into a new wholeness and a freedom they had longed for since the very first time they experienced the liturgy of Passover and heard their grandparents tell them about the original liberation from Egypt.

Save us, save us now. The people watching Jesus that day were tired of occupation, they were tired of feeling like strangers in their home, they felt hopeless that they could do anything to change their lives.

Save us, save us now. I cry those words to God a lot. Save us from the violence that pervades our world. Save us from fear and politics and hate. Save us from racism that is in our systems and our imaginations whether we want to acknowledge it or not. Save us from political partisanship so we can work together to improve homelessness and education and hunger in our city and in our country. Save us from the grief of another school shooting. Save us when we feel hopeless and like we can’t make a difference and change our world. Jesus, save us now.

 Save us, save us now. What do we do when we don’t see God working? What do we do when we feel like God won’t save us? Dr. Renita Weems says, “Faith is the space between the last time God spoke to you and the next time God will speak.”

Christian speaker Margaret Feinberg was interviewed on a podcast that I have been listening to called Everything Happens.[[1]](#footnote-1) Margaret was diagnosed with breast cancer and she talked about the people who brought her casseroles. Her treatment caused her to lose her taste buds so what used to taste good no longer did. She shared with a friend her problem that all of these casseroles that people were bringing tasted like dirt. This friend sent her a $100 Whole Foods gift card so that she could try food out and see what would taste good to her now. She was overwhelmed with the generosity of her friend. Then, the next month the friend sent another $100 gift card for Whole Foods arrived. She said that the texts and emails from friends and family had thinned out, but each month the $100 gift card from Whole Foods would arrive from her friend Peggy. For twenty-six months the $100 gift card from Whole Foods arrived. Twenty-six months. After twenty-six months Margaret called her friend Peggy and said that she was doing better and that she didn’t need the $100 gift card anymore. Think about that. It took her more than two years to tell her friend that she no longer needed this help. Getting better takes a long time. Twenty-six months. That is generosity. That is God speaking. Faith is the space between the last time God spoke to you and the next time God will speak. We are called to be the hands and the feet of Christ. We are called to be in that space when kindness thins out. Can we keep up the kindness for more than two years?

Save us, save us now. Jesus doesn’t save us in the way that we expect. Jesus didn’t save the crowds on that Palm parade day in the way that they expected. Jesus didn’t dismantle the oppressors from their thrones, defeat the Romans and restore Israel to power. When the people cried Hosanna, they wanted Jesus to save them in the way that they wanted, in the way that they envisioned. They didn’t want a savior who dies. This next week shows us how God saves. God makes the world whole through suffering, through vulnerability. Jesus doesn’t give us what we want, Jesus stands with us where we are. This next week we remember and we celebrate that God is with us, God is for us.

Save us, save us now. God saves us by challenging us. God doesn’t hate the same people we hate, as much as we would like God to. God can help us transform our anger into something life-giving like courage, love, change, compassion, and justice. Brene Brown says, “When we let people take our vulnerability or fill us with their hate, we turn over our entire life to them.” (Braving the Wilderness).

Being a Christian means we believe in transformation. Being a Christian means we look outward toward the needs of others because our existence, our meaning, our well-being, our future, is bound up in the existence, meaning, well-being, and future of those around us.[[2]](#footnote-2) Every year I am amazed at how quickly the cries of the crowd change from “Save us” to “Crucify him” in just a few days. We set people up as the answer to our hopes and as soon as they disappoint us, we tear them down.

Jesus empties himself, taking the form of a slave, humbles himself and becomes obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus saves us from a world that teaches us that what matters most is what we want.[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus saves us and shows us that meeting our neighbor’s needs satisfies our heart’s deepest desire.[[4]](#footnote-4) May the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus and may this Holy Week show us once again that after death there is life.

God is in the business of bringing life from death, giving hope to the hopeless, and drawing us to life abundant.[[5]](#footnote-5) God is with us in this wilderness we call life. Hosanna. Save us, save us now. Jesus did and Jesus does. Love did and love does. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://wunc.org/post/kate-bowlers-everything-happens-now-podcast#stream/0 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/palm-passion-b-cries-confusion-compassion/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/palm-passion-b-cries-confusion-compassion/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/palm-passion-b-cries-confusion-compassion/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-1-b-lenten-courage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)