

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – March 28, 2021 – Hosanna Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Mark 11:1-11

In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue that “the procession Christians celebrate on Palm Sunday was most likely a protest march. On that day there was a ‘peasant procession’ led by Jesus as he entered Jerusalem from the east. At the same time there could easily have been a full-fledged ‘imperial procession’ led by Pontius Pilate and his Roman soldiers who entered from the west.”¹

Friends, it does not take much imagination on our part to determine which of these two was the more formal and impressive. Which of these two “embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world.”² Which of these two would have captured the attention of the city’s inhabitants. And which of these two was barely a footnote for the residents there.

You see, in Mark’s Gospel, no crowds come out from the city to meet Jesus.
³ Instead, we learn that the only participants in this peasant procession are those who

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* (Harper, 2006), 5.

² Borg and Crossan, 5.

³ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 203.

have accompanied him on the way. And it is these, his most devoted followers, who greet him with palm branches and with shouts of “Hosanna,” as Jesus enters the Holy City on the back of a borrowed donkey.

Notably, Roman soldiers regularly seized animal and human labor from the people. This means that when Jesus promises to return the animal promptly, it distinguishes him from the ruling forces.”⁴ And when Jesus arrives in this manner, he fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Amazingly, the peasant faithful are correct: Jesus is the Messiah. And yet, the faithful are badly mistaken regarding one central tenant of his Lordship. Namely, he will not immediately restore the fortunes of Jerusalem.⁵

Amid the relative triumph of the peasant procession, Jesus’ fate is sealed. And with his final days rapidly approaching, Jesus will embody an alternative kingdom that is not of this world. His kingdom will stretch the concept of humility beyond its known limits. And in the midst of his suffering and death, his vision will leave the disciples fleeing for their lives in horror and astonishment.

⁴ Pheme Perkins, *Mark, The New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 658.

⁵ Williamson, 204.

Palm Sunday serves as a bridge between victory of enthronement and the defeat of rejection, between the energy of life and the inescapable reality of death, between the audacity of hope and the pit of despair. And Mark's Gospel is unique, some would even say odd, in its recounting of this narrative. As Mark explains it, "there is no mention of the city, or the Pharisees, being agitated. Instead we find Jesus, possibly all alone, 'looking around' the city and then heading back to Bethany to rest with the disciples because 'it was already late.'" ⁶

This description was so troubling to John Calvin that he argued that Mark "must have made an editing mistake." ⁷ But what if Mark was simply telling the story as he knew it? And what if Mark, as the oldest manuscript of the four, was actually the most historically accurate? In this case, Mark's Jesus serves to upend even more expectations.

Let me explain what I mean. There is a television series called 24 in which a fictional character named Jack Bauer is the lead protagonist. Bauer spends his days with the Counter Terrorist Unit based in Los Angeles as well as the FBI in Washington, D.C. His work typically involves helping prevent major terrorist

⁶ Cynthia Rigby, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 112.

⁷ Rigby, 112.

attacks against the United States, and he is credited with saving both civilian lives and government administrations in the process.

Cynthia Rigby writes, “in twenty-first-century American culture, we tend to value doing over thinking. Looking around or calling it a night are far less likely to be considered world-changing behaviors than condemning rampant corruption or calling out hypocrisy on no sleep.”⁸ Yet, the Messiah in Mark’s Gospel is not like Jack Bauer.

Jesus “is not confined to twenty-four hours to save the world with no time to rest or think. It might even be the case that Jesus is looking around to determine what his plan is for the next day; that reflection and strategizing are the work of the untriumphant Messiah he is. Perhaps he wants to sleep on his radical plan, just to be sure it is what God is calling him to do and not an extension of his own bravado.”⁹

If this is the case, then the Markan Jesus is breath of fresh air for Presbyterian Christians who carefully weigh our options before naming our objectives and

⁸ Rigby, 113.

⁹ Rigby, 113.

plotting the way forward. We are a thoughtful and deliberative body. And when we take action, we do so with confidence born of the Spirit.

As we commemorate Jesus' last week on earth, might now be the acceptable time for thoughtful reflection and prayerful consideration? Might now be the acceptable time to reject the endless procession of empire and join the one born of peasants? Might now be the acceptable time to shout our Hosannas and to lay palm branches at his feet? Friends, might now be the acceptable time to take up our crosses and follow him?

This next week will be filled with intensity as the forces of evil do everything in their power to cling to relevancy. They will seek to dash the power of love through violent means, and will attempt to quell the coming kingdom of God with the atrocity of crucifixion. But they will not have the final say.

Once Jesus has looked around Jerusalem, and returned to Bethany with the other disciples to rest because it was already late - once he has considered his future, and returned the donkey to its rightful owner, he will return to face the brutality of vengeful world. He will welcome his destiny free of riches and without any weapons to defend himself. Then, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life,

he will be glorified and crowned Lord of all. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.