

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Mark 11:1-11**  
***Journey Through the Wilderness: Find the Parade Route***  
**April 5, 2009**  
**Lent – Palm Sunday**

NRS Mark 11:1 *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.*

What a week we have before us – The Masters! I am the most popular pastor among my circle of friends throughout the country during this week, because I get emails and phone calls reminding me that if I happen to get an extra badge, they can cancel services at their church and show up. You do not have to like golf to get swept up in the excitement. The city readies itself for the legends of the game and all the world, to descend upon us. Even though it comes at a great inconvenience as we avoid Washington Road, and our own members disappear for the week, it is a thrill to get caught up with the crowd, to feel the euphoria building.

And so, in today's gospel lesson from Mark, we are getting a bit swept up in a gathering crowd assembled for a parade. Here we are near the end of the Lenten season, and the beginning of what Christians through the ages have called Holy Week. It all starts with a parade. I have long held conflicted feelings about Palm Sunday. It comes in the spring of the year, when we are all feeling the pulse of newness and vitality. The gospel text suggests a party-like atmosphere; the air pungent with anticipation that something colossal is taking place in their time. But Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, and we know what this week is about, right? Holy Week turns out to be a very "un-party" like time. Holy Week encompasses the last days of Jesus' life, as he faces Jerusalem's indignities which will end in a graveyard.

Today, however, it is almost like we get to open our Easter baskets early and allow for a little celebrating, so let's be part of the crowd and get on the parade route. Of course, now we have to ask, which crowd. There were two crowds in Jerusalem. One that welcomed Jesus and another that cursed him. One that rolled out the carpet and another that lined up along the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering, towards the spectacle of the cross.

Consider first the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. It's hard to understand their elation, unless we compare it to a time when we were welcoming someone important in our surroundings. Have you ever been to an inauguration parade? It is that kind of atmosphere. Have you ever gone back stage after a rock concert? It is that kind of electricity. You feel like waving your hands, you smile, you start the wave or let out a yelp, or cheer, and you break out the cell phone camera to snap a picture. It is that kind of crowd.

A couple of years ago, we traveled to New York City with many from this church, during the Thanksgiving Holidays. Practically all of my life I have watched the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and finally my family and I were going to see it for ourselves. That year, however, it was cold. It was cold and raining. Still, Clark and I found a good spot early in the morning and waited. Did I mention it was cold and

raining? In spite of uncooperative weather, however, there was an unmistakable thrill that ran through the crowd when that first giant balloon lumbered past us that cold, rainy morning.

## **EVERYONE WANTS TO BE PART OF A PARADE**

... And so, I suppose nearly every parade has the same look: fidgeting and cheering crowds, lining the streets with children leaning out, looking up the way, for the first signs that the parade has begun. Jerusalem was not really that different. Over the years, Jerusalem was used to receiving kings and conquerors who would come in a parade-like fashion. It would be a demonstration of grandiose proportions, communicating strength and pride. The new ruler would march in, and the crowd would sing an anthem or hymn dedicated to their honor, and then he would make an offering in the temple.

Word obviously had gotten around that Jesus – the one folks are rumoring to be the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Anointed One – would be making an entrance. Yet, instead of galloping on a steed or pulled in by chariot or accompanied by a battalion, Jesus awkwardly arrives on a colt, transportation for the poor and weak. Yet, with fervor that is hard to explain, people threw their garments to the ground, as a carpet welcoming royalty. People were cheering, children were singing, palm branches waving. What a time this must have been. Can you just imagine how the followers of Jesus felt as they watched such a greeting for their man Jesus - their man, whom they have followed, their man, whom they have served, their man, whom they had left everything behind, in order to be with him?

*It was a moment of possibility.* For you see, this was no ordinary celebrity, nor was this the usual traipsing of a royal conqueror coming in to claim what is his. This was a king of fishermen and tax collectors, a king of Samaritans and harlots, a king of the blind, demoniacs and cripples. I imagine that somewhere in that mass of humanity lining Jerusalem's streets, was the leper, who was thankful to be clean again...the woman, who was stooped over for 18 years now standing tall ... the mother, clutching her little girl, holding her up to see, "Look honey, there is the man who grabbed you by the hand, when you were laid out dead and brought you back to life. He gave you back to us." It was a moment of possibility for those who had been told all their lives there is nothing more that can be done.

This moment of possibility was invested in the hope that finally things will be made new. And what a hope that is, this hope in newness. We see the carnage in old: broken dreams and promises, broken bodies and lives, broken society and culture. Who is not hoping for a savior to make all things new?

No wonder they were throwing him a parade, this Jesus, king of the oppressed and the down trodden. He gave them hope and he gave them purpose. That is why we are here today, because in him we find hope and purpose. Goodness knows, we sure could use hope and purpose in times like these. Make it new, we ask, O God!

Yet, somewhere in the crowd we think we hear someone say,

### ***Stop the Parade - I want out!!***

When the mood and tenor is celebratory, who does not want to be in a parade, but in the days following the parade, Jesus changes the tone from one of triumphalism, to what needs to die. When it became clear that God's reign was not going to be about *our* expectations, or *our* ways, or *our* control, we hear in so many words, "stop the parade - I want out." And so, a new crowd assembles – who knows, maybe the same crowd - and some turn hostile. "*Hosanna, hosanna,*" will be replaced with "*Crucify him. Crucify Him!*" When Pilate asked, "*Which of the two do you want? Barabbas or Jesus?*" the crowd chose Barabbas, a murderer.

When this parade is over and those *in* the parade get off the route, the cheering that begins Holy Week turns to jeering. It is stunning what happens when the parade stops. We read of Peter's denial, Judas' betrayal, the disciples' flight, and the rejection of the religious establishment.

Have there been places in your pilgrimage when the parade stopped, and you found yourself denying what you knew was true, betraying what you knew to be real, fleeing what should have been your purpose for living? When the parade ends in a desert of unknowing or a wilderness of fear, what will you do? Where will you go?

Maybe, that is why in our Gospel lesson today, it ends with this enigmatic verse, verse 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.* He doesn't storm into the temple, upsetting money changers, stirring up murderous hatred, at least not yet. It is like he enters the city where he knows he is going to die, takes a reality check, turns around and quietly retreats. The parade is over, the mess is cleaned up, and now all that really remains is the cross.

I wonder what it is about Easter that packs a church every year. I certainly do not begrudge the crowds. In fact, like many of you, I look forward to the crowd and the parade-like atmosphere. I wish every Sunday could be like Easter Sunday. In fact, I wish everyday could be like Easter Day. Facing Jerusalem and the impending cross is an ugliness most of us would rather not see.

Many are kind of embarrassed about the cross and are not sure what to do with it. Surely, we say, God is not so blood-thirsty and primitive as to need a human sacrifice. Is Jesus just a substitute for us? Or is this cross just about a mob scene gone out of control, and Jesus is merely another innocent victim? Facing Jerusalem and the impending cross is an ugliness most of us would rather not see. Yet, Jesus has been seeing this all along. Jesus has seen what the darkness is capable of: the carnage, the violence, the injustice. Jesus sees the neglect, the diseased, the greed and the sin. Jesus does not allow the euphoria of a parade to blind him from what needs to be nailed up on a cross and die. It is not about human sacrifice, it is about sacred seeing.

I like parades, but I know that I need, when the floats are parked and the party is packed up and gone, to take a reality check, and see myself and to see this world as it really is, and put it all on the cross there with Jesus, so there can be new life.

Jesus, we know, does not stay in Bethany, but comes back to Jerusalem, this time without a parade. Jesus breaks bread with his disciples, and he breaks his body for the world, and as Susan Andrews writes, "irrevocably weds God to the fullness of human pain and suffering." (*Christian Century* March 24, 2009) Through Jesus, God is there, when the parade has stopped and the suffering has started. Through Jesus, God is there, when the world has deserted and it is just you in the desert or the Garden. Through Jesus, God is there, when life has been broken and drained and spilled out. Through Jesus, God is there, because although death is what was nailed down, life will be raised up.

This whole journey through the wilderness, which has marked us for Lent, is about dying to the brokenness of this world and in our lives, dying to what is wrong, dying to what is unjust, and dying to the wars of flesh and mind. We have to face the death of Holy Week and the death of Jerusalem before we can rise to the wholeness of the new.

Do you remember how we marked this season on Ash Wednesday? We came forward to the front of the church, and instead of having the symbol of mortality marked in ashes on our foreheads we had the sign of the cross smeared on our palms, like nail-prints, like death.

What is it in you today that needs to be nailed to the cross? Face it, that you might live in the new morning of Easter.

What failed dream, shattered hope, or bitter disappointment, needs to be nailed to the cross? Face it, that you might live in the new morning of Easter.

What dark shadow dwells in you, that has bound you, blinded you, crippled you? Face it, that you might live in the new morning of Easter.

The parade has stopped, the crowds have dispersed, and now we must decide who we are and where we will go, and who—who we will follow.