

“The One Who Comes” (28 Mar 2021, Palm Sunday)

Mark 11:1-11

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material supplied by UMC Discipleship Ministries

Please join me in a word of prayer: O God, our God, blessed is your name in all the earth. We have praised you in song and prayer. We have listened to your word proclaimed through the Gospel. Open now our hearts and minds to hear what you would say to us this day. Grant us greater understanding of the marvelous love you have gifted to us in your Son, Jesus. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be found pleasing to you. And it is in the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

This morning’s message is called “The One Who Comes.” It is based on material supplied by the UMC’s Discipleship Ministries program and some of my own thoughts on the lesson.

The focus of our message today is on what is traditionally referred to as the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It comes on the eve of the Jewish feast of the Passover commemorating God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt centuries before.

We’ve remembered Palm Sunday in our worship service today through the prayers, the songs, and the words of the Bible. We recall this event as a triumph because we know that this story ends on Easter Sunday in Resurrection. But what if we didn’t know that part? What if, like those who greeted Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey’s colt, we had no idea what would happen a week later? It’s hard to ignore what we know, to put ourselves in the sandals of the people who cheered Jesus on some 2,000 years ago, but what if we could step back and watch the events described by Mark as they took place? We might observe that:

- The crowds didn’t seem so big when compared to the overall population of Jerusalem—the whole city did NOT welcomed Jesus, only a small number of his followers and, perhaps, some curious onlookers went out to greet him.
- This crowd was noisy enough, but Jerusalem was a big city. Their shouted “Hosannas” would not carry very far into the city—only the nearby neighborhood would be aware of the commotion outside their doorstep.
- Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was enough to make the Jewish religious leaders worry. They were already looking for an excuse to get rid of him. But most of the population knew a parade like the one Jesus led was nothing but a farce. Afterall, everyone knew Rome was in charge, Caesar was emperor, and no out-of-town traveling rabbi would convince many people otherwise.

If we saw the events of Palm Sunday the way most people living at the time saw them, we would probably conclude along with them the triumphal entry was just a parade of fools embarked on a fool’s errand. There’s a day of foolishness that comes around this time of year on the secular calendar that sometimes coincides with the events of Holy Week—April Fool’s Day. We all know it as a day to play jokes on other people.

It’s hard to say how this day came about.

- Some believe that centuries ago, a few rural parts of Europe celebrated New Year’s Day on April 1 instead of January 1, as most people celebrated it. Of course, these folks were called April Fools.
- Others think April Fool’s Day might be connected to a Roman festival called Hilaria (from which we get the word “hilarious”), which fell on March 25. For Romans, Hilaria was a day of fun and rejoicing tied to the coming of spring.
- Still others suggest it could be related to the Festival of Fools from medieval times. This festival occurred near the end of winter; it was an opportunity for lower class folk to let off some steam by mocking the people who were in power.

How appropriate, then, for Palm Sunday to fall so close to April 1. By entering Jerusalem the way he did, Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies about the Messiah, God's anointed one. He was also leading, AND taunting the ruling class, mocking them, showing them up as false powers who were out of step with the kingdom God was bringing into the world. In case you missed these signs, here they are:

- Jesus and his followers gathered on the Mount of Olives to begin their march into Jerusalem. This spot was closely associated with God's vindication of Jerusalem. The prophet Zechariah wrote of the coming Messiah: "On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east...Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him." (Zechariah 14:4a, 5b).
- Jesus chose a donkey's colt to ride into the city, one that had never been ridden before. A king going to war would ride a powerful horse; when he comes proclaiming peace, though, he rides a donkey.
- His followers walked along with him shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."
 - o Hosanna was a common acclamation in the psalms. It was a shout of joy and welcome.
 - o It's original meaning was "Save Us" or "Save now!" Only a true king could save the people.
 - o Previous would-be kings were more interested in their own power, Jesus came with God's power to save them.

No one watching this entourage could miss the irony. This was Jesus' declaration of authority and power over the powers that were who looked upon Jesus as an outsider and an irritant to their carefully guarded status quo. It really was the best April Fool's prank ever: The one who appeared to be powerless is really the one who is truly king. The one who rode into a war zone with the authorities out for his blood is the Prince of Peace. Palm Sunday gives us the opportunity to remember these prophetic actions.

I can remember celebrating Palm Sundays when I was a child, and maybe you can too. I remember taking the palm leaves and marching around the church, waving them to welcome Jesus on Palm Sunday morning. Doing this is a way of declaring our allegiance to the Prince of Peace, the one the world considered a fool, the one the world tried to destroy.

Maybe Palm Sunday gives us the chance to take part in the best April Fool's Day ever. That's because it unmask the powers of this world, showing them to be nothing when faced with Divine Love.

Of course, we need to remember the week has only begun. The principalities and powers of the world resist being turned upside down. They push back and try their best to restore order, as they understand it. And just when you think you've won the battle, you find you are alone again. This was the experience of Jesus during Holy Week. This is why even in this moment of triumph—as Jesus rides into town in the name of peace—we remember the path he rides weaves its way through another valley, one that will take him into the lowest of lows and through the darkest of shadows.

By the end of this week, Jesus will travel a dark and lonely road that leads to suffering and death. So, who's the April Fool now?

- Maybe we are for holding on to such hope in a world that sees so little about which to be hopeful.
- Maybe it's Jesus, who continued to teach through insults, beatings, and degradations on his way to a wooden cross; who proclaims Easter joy in a Good Friday world.

Maybe so. But given the choice, on Palm Sunday, I'll still wave my palm branch and shout hosanna for the one who comes. It may seem I'm an April's Fool; but I'd rather be a fool for Christ anyway.

Amen and amen.