**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Palm Sunday”*

Mark 11:1-11

March 25, 2018

Today is the day we’ve been waiting for a long time.

Jesus finally enters Jerusalem. Until now he’s been out there in other places, around Galilee, tiptoeing in and out of Samaria, roaming around Judea.

But today’s finally the day he enters the holy, capital city of Jerusalem. And he does so quite dramatically. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus rarely acts with this kind of flair. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. Even when he does dramatic things, like healing someone or casting out demons, he almost always immediately tells the person, “Shhh. Don’t tell anyone about this. Don’t tell them about me.” It’s as if he’s keeping the secret about his identity as long as he can. Not all the gospels read exactly that way, but Mark does, so if you’re reading through Mark, you might expect Jesus to enter Jerusalem in the same way, kind of tiptoe in under the cover of darkness or even in disguise.

That Jesus decidedly does not do it that way amplifies the significance of the way he does enter Jerusalem, on a donkey like old King David, fulfilling the well-known prophesy, serenaded by the unshushed celebratory shouts of a crowd of people who meet him at the gates and line the sidewalks. Their shouts of praise are of the highest order, “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming of our ancestor David. Hosanna in highest heaven!”

It’s like Jesus has been shushing creation for so long, that even the very rocks have been waiting for the moment when they can also shout. Now the dam has broken. The flood waters are washing through the valley. Voices are not shushed any longer. Silence is now but a memory, a relic. Now there is music, laughter, praise, hymns, liturgies, the rustle of leafy branches.

It is a symphony of hope.

The story I would like very much to tell from this moment is of a parade leading to the halls of misused power and the hearts of men and women. I would love to tell a populist story of a misunderstood preacher seen finally for who he really is, who changes the world with love, integrity, compassion; how he gives hope to millions as they see in him the world as it can be and see in him the God who created and loves them.

That’s the story I wish I could tell, and it could be a marvelous story. At least it would be a terrific western story, a trope told and retold many times before. The bad guys have taken control of the innocent, feckless townspeople, the mine, the saloon, and the jailhouse. They came as smooth talkers, but now have their boot on the throat of the townspeople. The townspeople are not totally off the hook here. Their unwillingness to confront the bad guys when they showed up, their greed at believing they could benefit from these new guys, all of it conspired to make an easy path for the bad guys to take control. Oh, there were a few who raised their voices in protest. But they were silenced as fools, as malcontents, or as myopic dreamers that things could ever be like they once were. The bad guys came and the townspeople let them come. Though, in reality, it didn’t matter if the townspeople let them come or not; they were coming no matter what. You know how the story goes. The oppressed lament of the town rises until it is heard by the righteous gunslinger who alone has the steely-eyed fortitude to stand in the middle of the dirt road, fire off round after round and never be hit in the shootout. He comes, gathers a few brave helpers. With his unyielding leadership, the nefarious bad guys are killed or driven away and the peaceful town celebrates their mysterious savior who rides off at sunset. Other places need me. You’ll be fine.

That’s a great story. It’s not this story.

This story moves in the other direction. The savior arrives to shouts of acclamation and all the symbols of conquest. This story will eventually be a story of victory over the forces of oppression, death, and evil over us and within us, but not yet. Before then, our hero will suffer like no one else has suffered. He will not kill them, but be killed by them. He will not run them out of town to cheers and acclamation, but will be led out of town, abandoned by almost everyone, to a nearby place where he will be killed in front of everyone in town as an example of what happens when you challenge the rulers of this world and this present age.

Before Christianity is a story of victory, it is a story of suffering and woe. Whatever we hoped for standing there, finally allowed to cheer by the roadside leading into town, we were gravely disappointed.

Admittedly, you might miss that if you go from the parade of Palm Sunday directly to the party of Easter without journeying down the dusty roads of Holy Week. I suppose it must be common for Christians to be formed by this liturgical leapfrogging where all the lights are bright and the volume is turned up high. It must be common if you judge it by how Christians often are shocked that Christianity is something other than a continuous victory parade and Christians are always appreciated. We are just shocked and offended when there’s any notion that this life to which we’re called is going to call for some challenging times, from which we will not be constantly protected, from which we will not be quickly delivered.

This is hard to gulp down. We like to run things to ensure that everyone joins our parade whether they like it or not, and that the road goes on forever and the party never ends. One state legislature this week has voted to require all its schools to post “In God we trust” over the doors. In another state, the 10 commandments are on the front lawn of the courthouse. I think we secretly know these are pretty hollow, really, these grasping gestures.

If we go straight from parade to party, triumphal entry to graveside victory, we miss seeing what this is all about and are left with few spiritual resources to trust God in the darkness of life. You see it sometimes in people whose faith is shaken to the core when life gets tough. Hard things, painful things sometimes. Everything in life isn’t a parade or a party. And it’s not in the gospel either.

In God we trust has, unfortunately, been tamed by its use as a slogan. In God we trust is the heart of holy week, when the music stops and the musicians flee along with everyone else, when Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

It would be a marvelous story to tell of victory snatched from the jaws of death by our great hero in human likeness. Such a story would shape our whole world in triumph over certain defeat, of a lone man standing bravely against evil. When the dust and the smoke settle, he stands alone, victorious.

That would be a wonderful story to tell. But we can’t tell it yet.

That would be a wonderful song to sing. But we can’t sing it yet.

That is not this story, not yet. This is a story that goes like this: And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. From here he has a path to follow, and a calling to embrace. From here we have a path to follow, and a calling to embrace.

The story we have to tell is a story of love, courage, faithfulness, and uncommon trust in God in and through the suffering. It is the greatest love story ever to be told and we thank God for all of it.

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