***ALREADY LATE***

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Texts: Zechariah 9:9-10 and Mark 11:1-11

Red and Eileen Datt were friends of our family in Slippery Rock when I was growing up. One evening they had a couple over for dinner, and after they had finished eating the couple stayed and stayed and stayed, missing all the social cues that suggested it might be time to leave and pushing past Red’s usual bedtime. Finally sometime after 10:00, Red said to his wife, “Eileen, it’s getting late. Let’s go to bed so these nice folks can go home.”

Jesus seems to have been more attuned to the social cues, for as Mark records it, after his Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem, Jesus *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 would return the following day and create a ruckus by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving out all who were there to do business – those buying or selling animals for sacrifices or hawking temple souvenirs – and chastising the religious leaders for making what was intended to be a house of prayer into a den of thieves. But that would not happen until Monday morning, according to Mark; on that Palm Sunday evening, Jesus just entered the temple, looked around at what all was happening, and then left the city and returned to Bethany, *as it was already late*.

One might wonder if Jesus was there doing reconnaissance ahead of the next day’s return to the temple or whether mulling over the egregious things he found there gave rise to the righteous anger he unleashed on Monday morning. Mark doesn’t say; Matthew and Luke wrap it all into one chaotic day – the Palm Sunday parade and then the chaotic cleansing of the temple as Jesus’ anger boils over when he enters the temple and sees all the unholy activity. For Mark, either the parade happened later in the day than Matthew and Luke recall, or Jesus is a little more deliberative in his decision as to how to respond to what he finds there, for *it was already late, and so he went out to Bethany with the twelve*.

In the other Gospel accounts time speeds up in this Holy Week. From the time of his entrance into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey the city is abuzz and the conflict begins and the stakes rise. But in Mark’s Gospel there is this brief respite after the Palm Sunday parade and his quick visit to the temple. In the days that follow, he will return to the city by day and then leave the city each night. He will cleanse the temple, teach, and heal, and he will share the Passover with his disciples. But on that night of the Last Supper, he will not leave the city for he will be arrested, and when he finally does leave the city the next day, it will be with a cross upon his back on his way to Golgotha where he will be crucified beneath a sign reading, *King of the Jews*. On Palm Sunday he enters the Holy City as king to shouts of hosanna, and that evening he leaves on his own terms in the twilight. It is a day of joyful celebration and a time for expectant reflection. It is the calm before the storm, and the storm is, in part, a storm of Jesus’ own making.

As you heard, the Palm Sunday parade was not a spontaneous event; it was like a choreographed flash mob. Jesus planned his entry into Jerusalem as he approached the sister cities of Bethphage and Bethany on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. It is only a little over a mile and a half from those sister cities in the east to the walled city limits of Jerusalem to the west – about the same distance as from here to the Woodrow Wilson Birthplace. Like the stretch of Coalter Street from here to there, it is a rollercoaster ride on the Jericho Road that links them. A deep ravine divides Bethphage from Bethany, and from there the Jericho Road climbs the ridge of rock, dirt, and olive groves known as the Mount of Olives, then drops to the floor of the Kidron Valley where it winds past the Garden of Gethsemane and across the trickle of a stream known as the Wadi Kidron, before rising once again to the eastern gates of mighty Jerusalem. It is a rocky, dusty, road well-traveled by merchants and pilgrims alike.

For three years Jesus had walked everywhere he went – along seashores, up mountains, into towns, across the countryside, and even on water – but as he neared Jerusalem, Jesus arranged a ride into the Holy City on the back of a donkey in an act that carried clear echoes of Zechariah’s prophecy of the coming king. Zechariah told of that king riding into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey, riding in triumphant and victorious, but also humbly, in contrast to the white steeds upon which military heroes, like the Roman authorities, rode. The people had often sought to make Jesus a king, to call Jesus “king”, but he always refused them, contending that an earthly kingdom was not why he had been sent. On Palm Sunday he claims that royal title without uttering a word – a symbolic claim to kingship that would be grasped only by those who knew Zechariah’s prophecy. Who would that be? Not the Romans who did not know the Scriptures, perhaps some in the crowd waving their palms, obviously Mark, and certainly the religious authorities. They recognized this royal ride for what it was and in that recognition the storm clouds around Jesus grew more ominous!

It is doubtful that Rome felt much threat from this Palm Sunday parade. An itinerant preacher and healer from Galilee who had spent most of his ministry in country towns among the poor and outcasts hardly posed a threat to the Pax Romana. Mark’s description of the crowd who lined the road as he rode along incites no great trepidation:

*Many people spread their cloaks on the road and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the field*.

*Many* and *others* hardly describe a rabid crowd celebrating the arrival of a king to challenge Roman rule! Even their shouts echoing the words of Psalm 118 lack the explicit title of king apart from a reference to their ancestor King David. But it never was Rome that Jesus challenged in his preaching; it was the religious leaders – the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees – who bore the brunt of his criticism. They were responsible for setting a righteous example, for teaching and leading the people on faithful paths, and for providing compassionate care for them, especially for the most vulnerable, responsibilities they neglected badly in favor of securing their own places of power. In riding into Jerusalem as he did and then cleansing the temple the next day, Jesus was bringing the fight directly to their doorstep, to the seat of their fragile power, and they knew it!

Which brings us back to this brief respite between those two events – the Palm Sunday parade and the cleansing of the temple on Monday – this time when Jesus returned to Bethany in the cool of the evening, because it was already late. It was late in the day according to the text, but unbeknownst to the disciples and those who lined the streets with palms in their hands, it was also late in Jesus’ ministry and late in his life as well. They imagined this royal entry into the city was the start of something big, but they never imagined that it would end as it did in less than a week at the cross. But Jesus knew. He knew where this path was leading and still he rode and walked it, still he did obediently what he had been sent to do – to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom and God’s never-ending love for the world. As Marcus Borg describes it:

*Jesus’ entry (into Jerusalem) proclaimed that his message was about a kingdom, the kingdom of God, in which there would be peace, not war – a kingdom not based on violence…For the authorities, these two public acts (entry into Jerusalem and cleansing the temple) were the tipping point. Jesus was proclaiming a kingdom, a way of life on earth, that challenged and countered their kingdom of exploitation and violence.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Two thousand years later, I wonder if we who call ourselves Christian and followers of Jesus have grasped that truth – that his kingdom is about love and servanthood, not military or political power. Have we embraced his example of humility – the king riding on a donkey – or are we still looking for the savior on a white steed to come among us and set things right? Are we willing to recognize him as the messiah as he is, not the messiah we want him to be? As one columnist suggests:

*"What we are looking for... is neither a true leader nor a true Messiah, but a false messiah - a man who will give us oversimplified answers... justify our ways...castigate our enemies... vindicate our selfishness as a way of life and make us comfortable [with] our prejudices."[[2]](#endnote-2)*

That is not who Jesus is. Can you then wave your palms this Palm Sunday to honor the messiah as he really is, the humble king riding on a donkey whose kingdom brandishes no military weapons and imposes no violent solutions, but proclaims a message of love, forgiveness, and peace among all who live within it?

It was already late when he left the city that night. And it is getting late for us as well, but perhaps not too late. It is perhaps not too late for us to embrace him for who he is and to commit to follow his example – however hard that may be. It is perhaps not too late to follow where he leads us, even if it is to the cross. It is perhaps not too late for us to be the disciples he calls us to be, the followers we claim to be as we enter this Holy Week. It is already late, but perhaps not too late – for you and for me. Amen

1. Marcus J. Borg, *Convictions*, HarperOne: 2014, pp.139-141 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sydney J. Harris, We Want a Messiah [↑](#endnote-ref-2)