

“Lambs, Lions, and Donkeys”

Mark 11:1-14

Palm Sunday March 25, 2018

Dr Clay Smith

All over the world today is called Palm Sunday, the official start to Holy Week, or the week of Jesus’s passion, his procession into Jerusalem to the cross and out of the tomb. This story appears in all 4 Gospels, but this year we will look at Mark’s account.

For nearly a year, Jesus had been travelling through Galilee, the northern part of Israel teaching and healing. The region is not all that large, and Jesus crisscrossed his way through the villages. It was time for him to enter Jerusalem for the work he had come to do. And expectations were high. Would he meet them?

11 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴ And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. ⁵ And some of those standing there said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. ⁷ And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. ⁹ And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”

¹¹ And 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.

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.

Perhaps one of my favorite of the Narnia series of books by C.S. Lewis is *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, named for the ship that carries the crew to all sorts of adventures. Near the end of the story, Lucy and Edmund note a large grassy meadow they would like to explore. As they begin to look, they see in the distance a white speck against the green and are drawn closer. Upon nearing, they discern that this white speck is indeed a lamb, who is cooking a breakfast of fish, which he shares with them. They had never known such a delicious meal.

Lucy and Edmund began to talk with this lamb about the way to the land of Aslan. You may know Aslan is the Christ figure in the stories, and his land is an image of heaven, with Aslan dwelling in peace with his people. The more they talked, the more they looked, they noticed something strange occurring. This lamb began to transform. Lewis wrote, “His snowy white flushed into tawny gold and his size changed and he was Aslan himself towering above them and scattering light from his mane.”¹ A bit later, this gentle lamb who had provided for them, who had become this powerful and majestic lion, became once more a lamb. What looked one way, upon a second and more careful look, is in reality something different.

What a picture for us. Jesus is the lamb who is the lion who is the lamb. He is the Lamb who takes away our sin, but also he is the Lion of Judah who rules and protects. He is the Lamb who forgives our sin.

The Jesus riding into Jerusalem on what would become Palm Sunday was the lamb who is the lion who is the lamb. This account ties together a couple scenes on that day to form a fuller understanding of who Jesus truly is. What may appear one way at first glance, is transformed at the second look. How do we see that?

1. The Lowly Entry of the Lamb.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Collins, 1976), p. 200, 221.

Often we call this story, this periscope, the “Triumphal Entry,” which it is in a way. Triumphal entries were what conquering kings did after they’d won a battle. They would ride atop a stallion, a war horse, mighty and ride into the city they’d just conquered in a raw demonstration of power. But that doesn’t quite fit here does it?

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a young donkey, a borrowed young donkey, at that. You may know from antiquity, that donkeys, rather than impressive vehicles of war, were ridden to communicate peace. In times of peace, especially from King David on, when a ruler entered on a donkey it was an announcement of peace and blessing upon that city. Additionally, prophecy from Zechariah 9 called for the Messiah to come to Jerusalem on a donkey. But this king announcing peace didn’t even have his own donkey to ride. He had no instrument of peace to offer the city...other than himself, that is.

Many have wondered about the inclusion of how the donkey was acquired. Some suspect it was a demonstration of Jesus’s miracle working power, knowing of this donkey tied to a post in Bethphage. Others, suggest that the owner of the donkey was in Jesus’s traveling party. In v. 3 and 6 if anyone in the community asked why you did this, Jesus told his advance team to let them know the lord needs it, which could mean *its* lord, the owner of the donkey needs it. We aren’t sure. But perhaps that line of question misses the point that Mark is making *theologically*. The point was that this was a donkey, v. 2, on which no one had ever sat. The details of the owner and getting the donkey were included to prove this was a donkey that had never been ridden. Why?

Animals used for sacred duty, Deuteronomy 21 and Numbers 19, tell us must NEVER have been used for ordinary service. The point is that this unridden donkey is being put to ceremonial and sacred use. How? The sacred donkey bears the Spotless Lamb, ferrying him in a lowly entry to the city for Passover, to be slaughtered for our forgiveness on the cross. This donkey carried atop his back the spotless Lamb of God slain for our forgiveness, not only to *announce* peace, but *make* peace by his blood shed on the cross.

Sometimes we expect our leaders to keep peace by projecting strength. We live that way in our lives often, too. We have peace if nothing is wrong or admitted. The peace we pursue so often is a peace that is faked, more like a truce, a “mistakes were made” sort of relationship with others—which of course never brings real peace anyway. This Sacred and Spotless Lamb came to make peace for sinners before a holy God not by faking it, not by projecting strength, but by offering himself as our servant, our sacrifice that we might have our sins and offenses removed bringing a real and lasting peace.

How fitting, then, the cry of the crowd as the Lamb arrived on a sacred instrument to be given over to his sacred duty on the cross. They cried, “Hosanna!” which means “Save now.” The king, coming not in triumph, but instead as a **sacred lowly lamb** led the Temple, v. 11, to the slaughter to do indeed what they cheered: Save us.

And yet that Lamb is also the Lion who rules as King. The King who is willing to show us who we are, that he might free to live in his peace. Free from the barren and empty lives we make for self.

2. The Lion reveals our lives.

We read in vs 12-14, what some critics have labeled Jesus’ moment of petulance. He was hungry, v. 12, and because this tree didn’t have any fruit, he cursed it...when it wasn’t even season for figs yet. How childish of Jesus.

But instead, what we find is a bit of transformation here: the lamb into the lion. As they walked from Bethany to Jerusalem that Monday morning, v. 12, they crested the Mount of Olives and could see the gleaming limestone Temple in front of them. From atop the Mount, when facing west, you see the towering Temple Mount with its gold shimmering in the spring sun. It was a glorious sight in its majesty, tradition and a place of pride for the people. Even under Roman occupation and oppression, the Temple of Israel stood proud, proclaiming something of the beauty of the people to whom the Temple belonged.

The Temple was special. It was the place of intersection, the touch-point of heaven and earth. This was the place that pictured God dwelling in the midst of his people. Of course, it must be beautiful and impressive.

As Jesus and the 12 came over the Mount, they saw in the background the Temple, and in the foreground a fig tree in leaf, v. 13. Passover time is generally about 5 weeks too early for figs on the trees. But, fig trees there produce an early

fruit. They are small and not quite as sweet as the fruit coming later, but nevertheless, the small early fruit comes. If the tree is in leaf, that was usually a sign that the early figs would be there. But, the leaves are too big to be able to see whether or not the tree has any figs on it. You have to get close and inspect.

Here's the catch, though. If you get past the beautiful and full leaves and see there are no early figs, one of two things has happened. Either they have fallen off which happens rarely, or it is a pretty good sign that the tree is diseased. It is in process of dying. Even though it looks so alive, and beautiful and vibrant on the outside, if there is no fruit it tells you the tree is diseased unto death. That tree has no real life in it; it is all for show. It looks leafy and lush, but the leaves simply cover over the barrenness of the tree. A hungry person, like Jesus was in v. 12, approaching a tree all leaf and no fruit has NO ability to quench that person's hunger. All leaf and no fruit. What a disappointment.

So remember where Jesus was. They were standing on a hill looking at the beautiful and gleaming Temple. It was a paragon of religion; it shined with pride of religion, of the special status of this ethnic people, the Jews. It glimmered with promise...but just like this fig tree, Temple religion had become barren. The religion it fostered seemed lush, leafy, protective, fruitful and significant, but in reality, all the glitz covered over the barrenness of it all. It had become what Jesus cursed and cleansed in the next section, where he threw out of the place of prayer for the nations those who clogged the Temple with commerce. There was no more room for lost and hungry people to find a God who sent the Lamb to atone for their sins. No room for grace and forgiveness. Souls hungry for God, for the reality of the promise of the gospel of life, could leave feeling starved and hopeless for any taste or touch of the life of God.

It offered no fruit to nourish a spiritually hungry people. In corruption, it failed to be what the people needed, a real touch point of heaven and earth, a place where the grace of God could be heard, felt and experienced. Instead it was just a shell of hypocrisy when the Lion came to inspect.

We must realize that a truly fulfilling and fruitful spiritual life does not come from shining things up on the outside. It comes from being connected to the God in the Temple. The real and lasting Temple, that touchpoint between heaven and earth was not the building that stood in front of them, but rather was embodied in the Savior, Jesus, who stood among them. How do I mean that?

Sometimes we attempt to shine our lives up, looking good on the outside for others, being respectable citizens and think that is the same thing as living for, or being fruitful in Christ. **But fruit is only produced when it is clinging to the vine.** Same with us, fruit is only developed when we are willing to admit we need him and clinging to Jesus himself rather than seeking to shine ourselves up. A relationship with Christ is not one of image management.

Making this very practical, one of the best gifts you can offer to another person is also one of the best witnesses for the Christian faith: living as a person of repentance. Not managing how I appear to others, but instead proclaim my need for a Savior. What invites people into spiritual life rather than the feeling of the should or the ought is to live quick to repent. To admit you need to remain connected to this Jesus who came to give his life for sinners like me, like you. Not those who USED to be sinners, but those who need him right now because I still deal with sin in my life. I still mess up. I still will not treat you as you deserve. I still will fail to love you. And yet, Jesus is a forgiving Lord and as we remain connected to the vine of his grace and love, he strengthens us to seek to live a better way.

What might our spouse pick up from us? What might our friends feel from us? All leaf and no fruit, or fruitfulness that comes from being a sinner saved by grace, connected to and trusting in the vine of Jesus who redeems and heals?

For our children—whether they are yours as parents, ours as a church community—one of the best gifts we as Christian adults can give children is to live as people who repent. In front of children when we sin against them. To our children when we sin against them. As we do, we model for them that this saved by grace thing is real, not just for show.

The Lion of Judah comes to us to say: I want more for you than a leafy, lush, yet barren life—void of the sense of my love and power. He wants his life to bubble up from within us as we abide in him, rest in him, trust him, seek him. Give him your heart. Jesus aims to give us more than a spit shine on the outside. He has come to remake us on the inside, satisfy our thirsty and hungry souls by giving us himself!

For this Lion of a King entered Jerusalem as a Lamb, led to the slaughter, led to the cross to bear our guilt and our shame, to bear all our pretending, the ways we cling to the leaf of religiosity to hide the barrenness of our souls. The

Lion of Judah is the Lamb making his way to the cross in our place, to free us from the enslavement of our idols and sins that destroy us.

So, as you prepare this week for the celebration of Easter next Sunday, walk the path of repentance alongside the Lamb who is the Lion, who rode atop a donkey of peace, to make peace for you.