

A Royal Procession -- Mark 11:1-11

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, we are about to open Your Word. As we continue this journey through the book of Mark, take us back in time to when this story took place. Help us see ourselves in the story. Open our eyes to also see Jesus. May this trip back in time change us today on the inside, in Jesus' name, amen.

Back in the days when the book of Mark was written, the Jews were ruled by the Romans. They had a ritual that was called the Triumph. It was a procession that took place following the victory of the Roman army. It was both a civil and a religious custom, including the chief magistrate as well as priests bearing the images of their gods. Flowers were strewn about amidst the burning of incense. On the day of his triumph, the army general wore regalia that identified him as near-divine or near-kingly. He rode in a chariot through the streets of Rome. Thereafter he had the right to be described as *vir triumphalis* or "man of triumph" (later known as triumphator) for the rest of his life.

Here is the likely order of the procession:

- (1) The Senate, headed by the magistrates
- (2) Trumpeters
- (3) Carts with the spoils of war
- (4) White bulls for sacrifice
- (5) The arms and insignia of the conquered enemy
- (6) The enemy leaders themselves, with their relatives and other captives
- (7) The bodyguards of the general
- (8) The general himself, in a chariot drawn by two horses
- (9) The adult sons and officers of the general
- (10) The army (without weapons or armor)

This type of procession was very common in the days when the book of Mark was written. And yet in the story we are about to consider from the book of Mark, we will see a very different kind of procession. It is, in fact, a royal procession. There has never been one like it in the history of the world.

Let's now consider our story today from the book of Mark. It is a very significant story. It is only the second story in the book of Mark so far that is recorded in all four gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Here is a summary:

Jesus sent two of His disciples to Jerusalem, telling them to bring back a colt. The disciples found the colt just as Jesus had described and brought it back to Him. Jesus rode on the colt while the people spread their clothes and tree branches on the road in front of Him. They also were shouting a song of victory. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, He looked around in the temple. He then went back to the town of Bethany, since it was already evening.

Let's now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. First, He experienced approaching Jerusalem. Mark 11:1 mentions a couple villages that were close to Jerusalem. One was Bethphage, meaning "house of unripe figs". The other village near Jerusalem was Bethany. There is some uncertainty as to the meaning of "Bethany". Some believe it means "a poor house" and was the location at one time of an almshouse. Others believe "Bethany" means "house of dates" or even "house of figs". Both of these villages were within two miles of Jerusalem. Mark 11:1 also mentions a hill that completes the setting for the story. It is called the Mount of Olives. This hill was just outside Jerusalem on the east side. As the name suggests, it was once covered with olive groves. At the base of the Mount of Olives was the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would be arrested, only a few days after this story in Mark 11. As you read through the gospels, the Mount of Olives seems to have been one of Jesus' favorite places to be alone with God and His disciples.

Second, Jesus experienced giving detailed instructions. Mark 11:1 mentions that Jesus sent out two of His disciples. But before He sent them on this errand, He gave them some pretty specific instructions. In Mark 11:2 Jesus told them to "go into the village opposite you". The preposition translated "opposite" could possibly be better translated "in front of". Perhaps Jesus and His disciples were currently in the village of Bethany and not far ahead they could see the village of Bethphage. And Jesus told them to go into that village. Then He said that as soon as they entered this town, they would find a colt. In other words, "You won't have to wonder around looking. As soon as you go in, you will see a colt." The Greek word, *polos*, that is translated, "colt", is only used in the New Testament for this story. It can refer to a young horse or donkey. But as you consider Matthew's and John's description of this animal, it becomes quite clear that it is a donkey's colt. And Matthew's account even specifies that it was a "son of a donkey", in other words, a male. In Mark 11:2 Jesus specified that this young donkey was one that had never been ridden. No one had ever sat on it. The description that Jesus specified here gives the idea that this colt had been saved for this particular occasion. Jesus told them that this colt would be tied up, and that they were to untie it and bring it to Him. In Mark 11:3 Jesus continues His detailed instructions: "If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and immediately he will send it here." Jesus reveals here an attitude of authority and ownership. He didn't seem concerned with whose colt it is. He didn't feel a need to ask permission to borrow it. He acted as if this colt belonged to Him. He referred to Himself, not as the Son of Man, as He usually did, but as "the Lord". This is very significant and the two disciples pick up on this as we will see in a moment.

Mark 11:4 says that the disciples found the colt, apparently without any difficulty. And it was tied (1) "by the door"; (2) "outside"; and (3) "on the street". All three of these details are significant. Houses in those days were set up in such a way that the courtyard was in the center. Typically a family would have kept their colt in this courtyard, off of the street. But in this case the colt was tied out on the street. The description that Mark gives in the Greek is that of two roads coming together. The exact location of this colt was at a fork in the road. Mark 11 verses 5 and 6 describe everything going just as Jesus had anticipated. The people did ask why they were untying the colt. And when the disciples give the answer that Jesus had given them, the people send them off with the colt. The disciples' errand is a success. Mark 11:7 says that they brought the colt back to Jesus.

Third, Jesus experienced riding in a royal procession. Mark 11:7 says that before Jesus was able to sit on the colt the disciples threw their garments on it. Verse 8 says that many followed the disciples' lead and spread their garments on the road. Others cut down leafy branches and laid them in the road. John identifies them as palm branches, a symbol in that culture of victory. As if these actions are not enough, the people begin to shout a song of victory. Mark 11:9, 10 records their song, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Hosanna is a word that means "O save!" and was often used to express praise to the Lord. These people did not make up this song, though. Their song was actually based on a song in the Old Testament. Psalm 118:25, 26 says, "Save now, I pray, O Lord; O Lord, I pray, send now prosperity. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We have blessed you from the house of the Lord."

It may be helpful to consider for a moment how this procession got started. What moved the disciples to throw their garments on the back of the colt before Jesus sat on it? What got the people so excited that they laid their garments on the road and cut down palm branches to lay in the road? Why did they begin shouting this song of praise to the Lord? There is a prophecy in the book of Zechariah that will help explain some of this. I invite you to turn with me to Zechariah 9:9. (Read) This is a Messianic prophecy. The Jews believed that this verse would be fulfilled by the Messiah. When Jesus gave orders for a young donkey to be brought to Him, no doubt the disciples recalled this prophecy. They understood what Jesus was doing. His instructions revealed the authority and ownership of the Lord. When the disciples went to get the colt, they knew that a royal procession was about to begin. And they were excited. Jesus was going to ride into Jerusalem as their King and as the Son of David, whose kingdom would never end.

Fourth, Jesus experienced entering the temple. Mark 11:11 says that Jesus went into Jerusalem and on into the temple. This is the first time the temple is mentioned in Mark's gospel. Following the life of Jesus as revealed in all four gospel accounts, it is clear, though, that this is not Jesus' first time to enter the temple.

However, this entrance was meant to be the grand entrance for Jesus to arrive at the temple as Israel's King. Mark's short account as to what happened when Jesus entered the temple speaks volumes. We will consider that a little later on. But all that Mark says is that He looked around at everything and then left.

Last of all, Jesus experienced returning to Bethany. Mark 11:11 mentions that Jesus left the temple with the twelve disciples and went back to where they had come from earlier that morning – the village of Bethany. And that is the end of the story. Truly it is a strange and abrupt ending to a royal procession. We will try to make some sense of this as we take some time now to reflect on this story.

As we begin, let's do so by asking ourselves a question. How does this story show us what it means to be a healthy Christian? This story reveals to us our Savior. But it also is meant to change how we live. Jesus in this story is our example. We will consider two ways in which Jesus is revealed as our example. The first way is that He rode on a donkey. Jesus could have chosen an impressive stallion that would have commanded attention. What He did choose was special and yet simple. The donkey was a very common animal, used by the poor for work and transportation. And yet the particular one that Jesus chose had never been ridden before. It was brand new, as it were. I find this quite compelling. Jesus' actions reveal that a healthy Christian is someone who is not in love with the things of this world. In some parts of the world this would be a mute point. But as we learned a few months ago in the story of the rich young ruler, most of us here today are richer than 90% of the world. I want to share with you a text that has been going through my mind. I invite you to turn with me to 1 John 2:15. (Read) To me this is a caution to not get too attached or entangled in possessions. Since we moved here to Ohio over two years ago, we've had to let go of some things. We "owned" (the bank was the actual owner) a nice house in Tennessee, which we sold when we moved here. And now we rent a simple house, which like Jesus' donkey is to us also special. We see it as a blessing from God. And yet we now have less resources or property to insure and maintain. And it has been, in a way, liberating. We had two vehicles when we moved here. But since then have come to have only one. At one time we never would have thought that we could live with only one small car. And yet we appreciate that car a lot more and see how special it is. And we also have less to maintain and protect.

I don't know where you are with all of this. But this has been some of our family's experience. And Jesus shows us in this story that worldly possessions are not what the Christian life is all about. They really aren't all they're cracked up to be.

A second way in which Jesus is revealed as our example in this story is that He continued on into the temple. Mark 11:11 says that Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. Now this has little apparent significance if it is understood by itself. But it becomes very significant in relation to what happened during this royal procession on the Mount of Olives. Mark does not record what happened. You have to go to Luke's account to learn of this. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 19:37-44. (Read) Just as the royal procession was getting ready to descend the western slope of the Mount of Olives and enter into the city of Jerusalem, the excitement and rejoicing reached a climax. And at that moment some of the Pharisees, who have heard the shouts of victory all the way in Jerusalem, interrupted the procession. They tried to get everyone to stop, but were unsuccessful. So, they finally appealed to Jesus, again without avail. Just at that moment something else interrupted the procession. The city of Jerusalem came into view. Everyone stopped to look and in the silence Jesus began to weep. He uttered a mournful lamentation over the city. Between these two interruptions, the procession never resumed. It seems that on that western slope of the Mount of Olives, the royal procession came to an end. It never reached Jerusalem. If the religious leaders in Jerusalem had welcomed Jesus, the people would have as well. Jesus should have been honored that day as the King that He was. He had come to establish a kingdom. His first message in Mark 1:14, 15 proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come. It was a kingdom in people's hearts, not on a throne in Jerusalem. All who received Him into their hearts would be His subjects. Also, according to various Old Testament Scriptures, Jerusalem should have lasted forever. If the city had welcomed Jesus that day as their King, the Romans would never have been able to destroy it. But because the leaders and the religious leaders of Jerusalem did not welcome Jesus as their King, the royal procession never made it to the city. Jesus entered Jerusalem and temple alone with the Twelve. Mark 11:11 makes that pretty clear.

Here's the point: even though the people became discouraged and the procession disbanded, Jesus stayed the course. He didn't stop or give up. He continued on into the city, all the way to the temple. He followed through. He remained faithful. He arrived at His destination, regardless of the fact that no one was there to welcome Him as their King.

And so He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who follows through. In the Lord's work we often get frustrated, bored, or discouraged. We begin with lots of enthusiasm and have high hopes of success. But others don't share our vision. Things don't work out the way we hoped. And often times we give up, get distracted, or go down a different path. But that's not the example that Jesus has given us in this story. For a healthy Christian people or circumstances do not determine where we end up. If God said, "Go to Jerusalem," we go, even if we arrive alone. I remember when I and two other college students went to Nepal as student missionaries. Things did not go as we had planned. We had problems renewing our visas. The local village police harassed us. And as a result some of the people in our missionary team began talking about going back to the States early. And some of my partners did just that. We arrived in September and were supposed to stay through the end of May or so. But by April everyone had left. And even though I remember feeling committed to stay the course, I also left in early May. We had a hard time staying the course.

Let's learn from Paul. Notice what he says in 2 Timothy 4:7, 8. (Read) Paul never gave up. He was persecuted and rejected. And yet he kept on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He finished the work that God had given him to do. Does this mean that we will never leave a place that God has called us to? No. But if we should move on from one place or ministry to another, it will not be because of others' failures or circumstances. It will be because God has called us to another place or ministry.

As I have visualized what happened in this story, I would have loved to have been there. What an honor to have taken off my suit coat and laid it down in front of Jesus as He rode by on the young donkey. Unfortunately none of us were there. We didn't get to raise our voices that day and shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" But you know, another day is coming, on which we will be able to sing that song of victory. As we close, I invite you to turn with me to Revelation 7:9, 10. (Read) Every single person here can be a part of this royal shout of victory. If the kingdom of God is within us, if our hearts have opened up to receive Jesus as our King, we will be there. I can't wait to hold that palm branch in my hand, standing in front of God's throne. What a day that will be. Let's all be there.