

Our second reading this morning comes from the gospel according to Mark, Chapter 11, verses 1-11. Listen for God's word to you this day:

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Then 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

Today we begin our annual journey to the cross with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. As we think about what we know is to come in the week ahead it's easy to see how all of the events of Jesus' ministry and this coordinated entry into Jerusalem where Jesus will assert himself in the temple will all add up to cause the chaos of an arrest and murder by the end of the week. But even as we sit here today knowing what is to come we have much to learn about the Christ who will be crucified.

Our passage in Mark begins with Jesus entering the city from the East, down the hill that is the Mount of Olives, riding on a donkey to the shouts of "save us" by those who have gathered around. There is hope and anticipation for a great reversal of power by those who have followed Jesus and it seems as though Jesus is about to assert that power as he heads straight to the temple upon his entry. But, then the text takes an abrupt pause saying, "Then 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.” Mark leaves us wondering what is to come, and questioning Jesus’ purpose with this grand entry parade, was the hope and expectation warranted or was there never to be a reversal of power with the coming of the Messiah?

Mark shows us a Messiah figure who does not have the same approach to power as the temple leaders and empire authorities. Jesus is once again showing the world how his way of doing things is not the way of the world, and that the reversal of power that is to come will look very different from what is expected by those looking for a Messiah.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on an animal signifying peace, an animal that exudes humility, he does not process, as expected, on a large stallion to exert dominance and pride, he does not come, as expected, wielding a sword and asking his followers to take up swords as well. You will recall from earlier in Lent our discussion of what it means to take up your cross, to sacrifice on behalf of God’s kingdom, not with a sword but at the risk of one’s own life.

All of Jesus' ministry builds to this great demonstration of what power looks like in the hands of the creator, what power looks like when it's left to God and not to human motives.

Our way of understanding what it means to exert power, whether its personal or institutional, is to humiliate, to make someone feel pain about who they are. To mock and tear down the essence of the person so that they and the world see them as having less or no value.

Jesus offers another way of understanding our humanity, our place as children of God, he offers a path of discipleship that stands in opposition to a power that is demeaning and humiliating to others. The goal of discipleship, of being led by God is to be made humble, to view oneself in modest importance, lower than God, and not above God or God's creation, including other people.

This power struggle is a tale as old as time. It isn't new when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, and it hasn't stopped since Jesus' death and resurrection. So, how did our fascination with holding onto power with the tools of "lording over", humiliating, oppressing, lead us to a place where God gave

us Jesus and to a place where his life would lead to death at the hands of the very people who claim to have all the religious and social power? God is trying to get our attention, in the most obvious of ways, showing us how our need for power and control will always lead to the death of God's creation, will always lead to the humiliation of the image of God carried by each human being. God was trying to get our attention with the life of Jesus, the empire was trying to get our attention with his death. Jesus rides into the city on a donkey, he does not bring a militia, he does not have a plan of attack. In the week ahead he will humbly face those before him. He is showing his disciples what it will mean to follow him, to become the people God intends all people to be, humble servants, not power-hungry people driven by the humiliation of others. We find ourselves faced with this same dilemma today. Given opportunity to offer ourselves humbly to one another, do we choose that path, or do we choose the one that makes us feel more powerful, more God-like?

Theologian Margaret Farley asks us: May we consider those whom we heap humiliation upon today, "because we find them 'different' from ourselves; those on whom we turn our suspicious stares, our demeaning glances; those who are shamed in the name of order in society, pushed to

the 'outside' so that we may stand tall and pure; those we abandon and no longer want to see and those we stigmatize with our self-righteous judgments."¹

Humiliation is the product of those who stand in direct defiance of recognizing God's authority and the presence of Christ in those whom they hope to humiliate. It makes the humiliator God, and those being humiliated disposable. Jesus suffers great humiliation, he is disposable to those in power, to those who would like to take God's place as creator.

What gives life, what sustains life for all creation, is a humble life, shown to us in perfection by the life of Jesus. The humbleness with which Jesus processes into Jerusalem, the humble nature of his ministry, inviting to himself those who are cast aside in society, and speaking against those structures that cause harm and humiliation to others with a humble but assertive approach, is all the example of discipleship that shows how great God's love is for us. It's not a glamorized, romantic love, but a love that is often described as being like a parent caring for a young child, or of an adult child caring for an aging parent, loving through all the realities of life,

¹ Margaret Farley, *Feasting on the Word*, 154.

the gross parts, the painful parts, the learning and growing parts, all of which requires a humbling of oneself to serve the other. This is the type of love Jesus is showing the world, this is the type of love Jesus invites us to show to the world. Humbleness, is a love that requires us to remove ourselves from being the object of our focus, requires us to remove any self-centered motivations of power, and work toward a view of self and other that honors the Christ within each person. The crowd was shouting for Jesus to save them, to reverse the powers, so that they would no longer be oppressed, so they would no longer be controlled by people in power, but experience freedom as God's children. But, they had no idea what that was going to entail. What the week ahead would bring.

I recently came across this quote by Dante Stewart, it says: "I used to think that being a Christian was about preaching the right things, believing the right things, and performing the right ways. I've come to see that being a Christian is more about imagining a world more loving, more just, and more equal than the one we're offered."² The world we are offered is about power and strength and might, a world that says our success should come at the expense of others. But, each year during this week, Holy Week, we

² Dante Stewart, @blackliturgies instagram

are reminded that the God we worship, the God we find in Jesus Christ, the image of God we carry within ourselves is about a humble, loving, compassionate path in life. It won't bring us worldly riches, but it will bring us all closer to our Creator, and closer to fulfilling our potential as the image bearers of Christ. This path we journey with Jesus is the path of hope, and anticipation, the same as was felt by those who gathered around Jesus on the Mount of Olives as he rode humbly into the city to shouts of "save us". Jesus is still leading the way, the question is in which crowd will you find yourself by the end of the week: the one shouting save us or the one shouting crucify him?