

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 118:19-29
SECOND LESSON: Mark 11:1-11
March 24, 2024
PALM SUNDAY

“Too Blind to See”
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A rather proud older woman had cataract surgery to correct her vision. Being a bit self-conscious about her thinning hair she had taken to wearing a wig, which she of course had to remove for the surgery. Following surgery as she was about to leave the recovery suite and go home, the people in the outside office heard her kicking up an awful fuss. One of the nurses rushed to her aid. “Madam, what’s wrong?” she said.

“Someone has stolen my wig and replaced it with this horrible nasty looking black thing!” she protested. “My wig was of high quality, and this, this is a piece of garbage!”

It took three staff members and documentation to prove to her that that was in fact her wig. The surgery had been a complete success.

The Messianic king of peace prophesied by Zechariah rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. According to the prophecy he would rule over a universal kingdom of peace, protecting the weak and proclaiming peace to all nations. It *was* the fulfillment of prophecy! So why didn’t anybody see this happening?! Why didn’t historians record it? Why wasn’t it recognized? What was it that prevented people from seeing who Jesus really was?

Part of the answer, of course, is practical. There was no media or technology. Information was spread by individuals on street corners in the markets or outside the Temples shouting out their own personal editorials. Sometimes official government proclamations were posted and those who could read were expected to pass along the information to everyone else. It would have taken a lot longer for word to have spread than it does now.

Logistics also played a role. Thousands upon thousands of people flocked to Jerusalem during Passover. Many would be waving palms. They would be shouting hosha na, or “save now!” This was a familiar acclamation used in the Temple, and it was part of the celebration. The nice and tidy pictures that we have in our mind are just not accurate. Jesus would have been *easy to miss* on that first Palm Sunday. It was chaotic and loud and the streets were mobbed. He could only be in one place at one time. Those in his immediate vicinity proclaimed the good news. Many who heard would have been curious. And word did spread that the prophet Jesus everyone had been talking about had come to Jerusalem for Passover. But a lot of others would not have had a clue. Then, like now, people were wrapped up in their own lives and concerns.

Aside from these practical reasons, however, there is a much more profound and significant reason that Jesus was not recognized for who he was. It is because he was not what they were looking for. Jesus had steadfastly resisted being made into a military figure. Some, no doubt, still held out hopes while others would have written him off. Their minds were so fixed on what **they wanted** that they were unable to hear or see anything else, *a typical human problem*. We should be wary of judging them, however, **because we do the same thing.**

The prophecy of Zechariah about the king riding on a donkey requires a good deal of deliberate distortion in order to be understood in terms of military conquest, and Psalm 118 is not a license for violence either, although *hosha na* from Psalm 118 was a prayer overlaid with nationalism. It was a warrior psalm used when Judas Maccabaeus entered Jerusalem 167 years earlier as a conquering deliverer. He too was greeted with shouts of "Hosha na!" and waving palms. But people chose triumphalist interpretations at the time of Jesus in order to create a nationalistic Messiah. The divine warrior image appeared to work during the time of the Maccabees, so many reasoned it could work again, and this time for good.

The delusion that Israel would drive out the Romans with God's help and end up on the top of the pecking order was widespread. It was a very seductive, if mistaken, vision. In the end it led to the total destruction of Israel as a nation. In fact, the only reason the Maccabees had been successful 167 years earlier was because there had been a power vacuum at the time. Jesus knew the hard cold facts, facts that zealous Jews of the time refused to face. He had not come to play politics, or to drive out the Romans. He came to preach about another kind of kingdom. His was a double-edged declaration. Yes, I am the Messiah, but the Messiah is not what you think. You think in terms of military and political liberation, *but God has something else in mind.*

The Zealots who were behind the two fatal rebellions against the Romans were religious extremists. They wanted the nation of Israel to be for Jews only, and the form of religion these Jews were to practice had to be their own strict legalistic form. They believed that God would give them a leader who would bring them political power nationally and internationally. There was no separation between religious and political authority. It was a Jewish nation and a Jewish state. And while it is easy for us to point to extremists within Israel today who promote the same idea, we are not immune from such dangerous fanaticism.

It is easy to forget living on the Main Line, but there are many places in America where a form of Christian Nationalism is on the rise. One U.S. House of Representatives joked at a Christian Gun Rights event in 2022 that Jesus would not have been crucified if he had an AR 15. Evangelical pastors are reporting that their congregations are objecting to the Sermon on the Mount, referring to it as "liberal talking points" and "woke ideology." When told that these are the actual words of Jesus their response has been, "that doesn't work anymore." Christian churches are being quietly hijacked by political operatives. If Jesus entered our nation today preaching the same message, would he be welcomed or rejected by most Christians?

In both ancient Israel and today when religious zealotry and political zealotry merge it can become an explosive and dangerous mix. We need to heed the words of Jesus and beware and support one another as we resist false gospels. In truth, even on the more moderate Main Line, we're not any different than the crowds on Palm Sunday who were blind to Jesus' true identity. We might not fall for conspiracy theories and offer unquestioning allegiance to a political leader, but we all want victory over our enemies. We all do want prosperity and political power. We want to be in charge of our own lives. But the Jesus who entered Jerusalem challenges us. Jesus didn't enter the city riding on a tank, but he also wasn't in a limo. He entered riding on the back of a donkey. Our Savior came to proclaim the kingdom. It is a kingdom not of this world. His kingdom will NOT give us power and material wealth. It will NOT bring us security and political power. It will bring us eternal life and reconciliation with God. To be a citizen of this kingdom is to live by different rules. It is to die to self in order to be reborn to new life in Christ.

The spirit looks beyond the flesh and perceives eternal things. We are at the beginning of Holy Week, a week in which we remember Jesus' last week on earth. This week let us consider the Kingdom of God and ask God to open our eyes to see the beauty of life in the Spirit, and to loosen our grip on what we think we **need** or **want**. As we enter Jerusalem, Jesus calls us to a higher path, and to a deeper journey. Amen.

Psalm 118:19-29

- ¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord
through which the righteous may enter.
- ²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
- ²³ the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
- ²⁵ Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.
- ²⁷ The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.

29 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Mark 11:1-11

11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, **2** saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. **3** If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

4 They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, **5** some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” **6** They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. **7** When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. **8** Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. **9** Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“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 heaven!”

11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.