

First Presbyterian Church
Mark 11:1-11 “Steps to the Cross: Revealed”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/28/2021

Over the course of Lent this year we have looked at various steps Jesus takes ...
and that we take ... toward the cross.

Last week we considered the secret of Jesus’ unique way of salvation –
that he would save by giving himself up.

Today we go from Jesus’ hidden secret to Jesus’ revealed identity.

What would you like to have revealed?

The day you we’ll have enough people vaccinated
to plan a party without being afraid?

The truth of what has happened within any number
of closed-door political meetings?

The pathway we could take to slow down climate change?

The reason why people shoot guns at random strangers
they don’t even know?

How about something more personal: the true feelings of someone
who has hurt you?

Or perhaps you would like to know the love felt for you
by those nearest to you?

What would you like to have revealed?

The revelation we receive through Mark 11 does not provide specific answers
to any of these things we would like to see into. But it does provide
a way of looking deeper into all of these questions and hopes
to reveal the hand of God at work.

For ancient Israel, what they wanted to have revealed
was the name of their next king – God’s chosen Messiah
who would deliver them from their enemies.

They were living in virtual exile: though they were in the promised land,
they were not living in the promised way.

Their lives were a cruel combination of the slavery
their ancestors had endured in Egypt,
and the leftover memories of those who
had eaten their fill of the fruits of this land.

Could there be a redeemer who would bring them back to their identity
as the people of the land?
Where was God's hand at work in all their repetitive suffering?

In chapter 11, Jesus approaches the final leg of his journey
from Galilee to Jerusalem. Mark's precise locations in v. 1
provide us with a wonderful sense of how close Jesus is.

Bethany and Bethphage are just East of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley.
Just north of them is the Mount of Olives,
where the Garden of Gethsemane is located.

These locations are not within the city walls of Jerusalem,
but they are certainly within its orbit.

The tension is building with these names showing up,
because of Jesus' secret prediction that he will suffer
and be crucified.

But in this entry sequence there are numerous truths about Jesus
which are revealed to those willing to pay attention.

The words and situations we encounter here do not merely stand
on their own, but they transport us back through
the Scripture of Israel and bring to mind
classic images of kingship.

In particular we run into the following texts:

v. 1 – *the Mt. of Olives*: in **Zech. 14:4**,

Yahweh (the Lord) is said to stand on the Mt. of Olives
on the day that he comes to Jerusalem.

v. 2 – *a colt tied there*. References to it being tied or untied occur five times.
Gen. 49:11 speaks of a coming king who tethers his colt to a tree.

v. 2 – *a colt that has never been ridden:*

Zech. 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

To get even more specific, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible,
the Septuagint, Zechariah 9:9 refers to the king arriving on a “new colt,”
one that has not yet been broken for riding.

– “*the Lord needs it.*”: This is added to recognize that the needs of a king
overrule the existing claim to ownership.

v. 9 the people call out “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”
This not only names a king explicitly, but it comes from **Psalm 118:26**.
Just before this line in Psalm 118, the Psalmist declares
“the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,
the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes!”

Just after v. 26 in Psalm 118, it says,
“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.”

So layer by layer we see symbols piling up that pertain to the dramatic work
of God in Jerusalem through a chosen figure who comes into the city
from the Mount of Olives, on a young donkey, while the people
wave palm branches before him.

What are we to make of all these references?

There is more at work here than just a teacher entering a city.
This is the arrival a new king in Jerusalem that symbolizes
the arrival of embodied salvation for Israel!

Did the crowd understand all of this? Did they get it?
Well, yes! After all they put together the references
supplied by Jesus’ actions and matched them
with corresponding symbols to similar passages
with their own actions.
So, yes, they understood the message.

But on the other hand, no!
For Jesus, all these symbols of kingship
that have piqued the crowd's excitement
are pointing in a very different direction than they think.

The call here is for us to see that Jesus has been revealed as King,
and that Jesus' kingship is utterly unique in its form and content.
We can't expect glory, honor, majesty, and power *here on earth*
as those who follow the king who was crucified.

And so we must respond by submitting our whole selves
– including vaccination concerns, political worries, gun safety fears,
personal relationships, and everything else else –
within this most fundamental reality.

This is what makes Palm Sunday something worth remembering every year.
Because it's incredibly easy to be lulled into waving our palm branches
and expecting Jesus to simply hand us the magic wand
to solve our problems.

There is no magic wand, but there is a deep truth:
Those who follow this king in losing their lives for the sake of others
will end up finding life with God that nobody can take away.

Jesus is King without rival, there is no genuine threat to that fact,
and so we can relativize our anxiety when it comes to other issues.

Oh that our church, our families, our community, and our nation
would welcome the disillusionment of Jesus
and be rid of illusions we hold so dear.
Oh that we would know that things that make for peace.

Then we could say, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord,"
and know that the Christ we welcomed was not a projection
of our own fantasies, but the true savior, God in the flesh,
walking toward the cross.