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# CLOAKING THE WAY

MARK 11:1-11

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
ON SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021 BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

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It was time for God's people to celebrate Passover. Jesus and his disciples joined the throngs of Jews who journeyed to Jerusalem for the festival. Passover is the time when the people of Israel remember the story of God delivering them from Egypt. During Passover in Jesus's day, the people would journey to Jerusalem to recall together how God had set them free from their slavery and bondage. It was a time where memories of God's liberation of and faithfulness to God's people in the past inspired them to imagine how God would be faithful to set them free in the future.

As you know, in Jesus's day, Jerusalem was under the rule of Rome. The Roman government was known for its displays of military power and might and for its swift and brutal actions to quell any efforts to rise up against it. Rome was an oppressive regime for any who were not its citizens and for them, too, sometimes. Rome was not interested in people imagining liberation from oppressors and overlords in general, let alone that people would consider being free from its control. In order to squash these dreams, the Romans would have great parades where conquering military leaders would ride into occupied towns on their warhorses, with the blood of those they had defeated in battle still dripping from their swords. These parades inspired fear and reminded people of what would happen to anyone who would try to oppose Rome and its ways.

Those who have traveled with Jesus through his ministry have heard him teaching about the Kingdom of God that had come near and witnessed his healing, redeeming, and liberating ways. Immediately before this journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Mark tells us in his Gospel that Jesus had healed a blind beggar name Bartimaeus. Perhaps you recall Bartimaeus sitting on the side of the road as Jesus was passing by. When he realized it was Jesus, he cried out saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." When people tried to shush him, he only shouted more loudly to Jesus for mercy, so Jesus called Bartimaeus to him. Bartimaeus ditched his cloak, jumped up, and went to Jesus. Jesus asked what he wanted done for him, and Bartimaeus said he wanted to be able to see again. Jesus healed him saying, "Your faith has saved you." Then Bartimaeus joined the crowd of those Jesus had made well in following him on the way. With each healing like this and each proclamation of God's kingdom come, the excitement about Jesus's work and the possibility of what it could mean for God's people surely grew.

Against this backdrop of the festival of Passover, the rule of Rome over God's people, and Jesus's healing work and teaching of the Kingdom, we hear the story of Jesus and his followers' entry into Jerusalem. If you know anything about how briefly Mark tells his stories, the level of detail he gives and the slow pace with which he tells this story gives an indication that something significant was happening. When they were a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem, Jesus sent two of his disciples into a nearby village to get a colt. He gave them precise instructions of where they would find what they needed and what to say when asked about why they were taking it. The two disciples arrived in the village and started to take the colt just as Jesus had said. And as you might expect, when people saw these unknown men taking something that wasn't theirs, they confronted them about it. The disciples responded as they had been instructed, saying, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." And, somewhat surprisingly, the people of the village let them take it.

At this point in the story, Mark wants his listeners to understand, to see clearly, that God is up to something particular in Jesus's journey to Jerusalem. Mark makes such a big deal about getting this colt because he wants his listeners to remember something proclaimed by one of the prophets of old that will help them see more clearly God's work in Jesus. Echoes of Zechariah's prophetic words resonate through Mark's telling of this story. List to what Zechariah proclaimed (9:9-10):

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt like Zechariah had prophesied, signaling that he was the one coming as God's victorious king, according to God's own ways.

As Jesus and his followers were making their way to Jerusalem, the people's hearts and minds were filled with excitement about Jesus's ministry and their memories of God's liberating work. With this allusion to Zechariah's prophecy, Mark ensures that those who see this scene perceive that Jesus and his ways are not the ways of Rome and other oppressive overlords. King Jesus and the ways of his kingdom are not the ways of warhorses and military parades but are the ways of a humble donkey-rider who ushers in peace and a rule unlike any other. This is to say, Jesus and his ways are not the preferred and expected ways of a world obsessed with power and hell-bent on harm. As Jesus entered Jerusalem and began the drama of Holy Week, he proclaimed in word and action that God's ways of bringing about redemption, liberation, salvation and freedom were not and are not what might be expected.

Jesus rode humbly on a donkey into Jerusalem. And the people around him cut branches and threw down their cloaks to cover the way. What is not obvious to us as we hear this story, but what would have been very clear to the people of Jesus's day are that these actions mirrored those of people making way for new kings in the past. The people assumed they knew the script of this play. Jesus would be a king like they had hoped for and expected. He was coming into Jerusalem to mark his new reign, with power and might. They shouted about their salvation—Hosanna! Save us!—and expressed blessings about the coming of this king and his kingdom. They covered his way with cloaks and cut branches to emphasize his kingliness and to express that he would be the conquering one. They assumed they knew how a king should act and what a conquering one would do, so they followed that script, and cloaked Jesus's way to prepare for it.

But maybe, just maybe, they missed that in Jesus, God flipped the script. Perhaps they had not heard Jesus's teachings or understood the implications of his ways. Maybe they didn't notice that he was on a donkey rather than a warhorse. And it's hard to blame them. Even the disciples who were closest to Jesus couldn't always see that in Jesus God was doing a new thing. They also tried to cloak his way with their expectations of how a king should conquer and save. Peter rebuked Jesus when he said he would undergo great suffering and death. Others argued about who would be Jesus's right hand man when he came to full power. They assumed that greatness in his kingdom was just like greatness in the kingdoms they had seen. But by cloaking the way, they simply got in the way of God's plan of action. Jesus's journey to Jerusalem, and what would happen there over the next week, were God's decisive declaration that God's ways are unlike human ways. The events of Holy Week were God's decisive declaration that God's work to bring about the salvation and healing of all people would happen in the way God freely chose.

We enter this Holy Week proclaiming Hosanna with the people on the way to Jerusalem. We cut branches and with celebratory proclamations bless the colt-riding king. And though we are millennia past Jesus's ride into Jerusalem, we are just as likely to try to cloak Jesus's way that eventually leads to the cross. You see, we faulty followers are unbelievably prone to getting in God's way. And there are as many different reasons for this and ways of doing it as there are people listening today.

For some, we get in Jesus's way because we prefer to have God's ways look like our own. "Save us!" we say but do it on our terms. We want Jesus to look more like the kind of liberator we prefer. We know our preferred liberators, right? They match our political affiliations and ideological leanings. And often we want Jesus to be and act like them. Even if we don't know exactly the method that will bring about healing and wholeness individually and communally, we often know quite well what won't work—which is to say, whatever the other side suggests. We simply want Jesus to fit our understanding and vision. We want it our way because that keeps us in control. So we shout "Hosanna! Save Us!" but we cloak Christ's way, and we limit his liberating actions to our own narrow vision and imagination.

For others, we cloak Christ's way to our healing and help because we feel unworthy of him entering into our messes. If we cover the road, we think, Jesus won't have to encounter the dirt and muck that makes up our lives. And because that voice in our head consistently echoes messages that we aren't worthy of this kind of self-giving care from another, we prefer that Jesus just stays out of it. So often we're experts at covering our messes, and yet we know them so well. We know the broken places and the areas where we just don't have life all together. But perhaps we've forgotten how to be vulnerable enough about those places to allow Jesus to enter into them with us. Instead, we've learned how to cover them with a façade of control and stability in whatever ways we can. We do just enough to make it look like we have it together. The mud of our lives is too messy for Christ, so let's just cover it with our cloaks and move on our way.

For others still, we don't really think we need someone to clean up our messes. Truthfully, we're not really sure what salvation we need anyway. We like the person we are, the strengths we have, and the life we've made. We're honest. We give to charities. We volunteer with our favorite non-profit and help others when we see the need. And, if Jesus is just about cleaning up our lives to make us a little nicer or to make our situation more appealing, then he can pass on us because we're pretty good. Maybe, we think, Jesus should focus his time on the people with real problems anyway. To add to all of this, our lives are comfortable the way they are. We don't need Jesus meddling, asking us to follow a way that might get us involved too deeply with other messy people. So we cloak Jesus's way, rather than joining him on it. No need for the mess of the way to be kicked up on us.

Maybe it is a combination of these or something else altogether that incline us to cover Jesus's road that leads to the cross. Yet entering this Holy Week, the scriptures invite us to remember that God flips the script and uses ways that are not our ways to do what we cannot do for ourselves. So the challenge is to get out of God's way. Will you allow God to do the work of salvation in your life even if it doesn't come in the way you want or expect it? Will you allow Jesus to be a messiah that gets in the mud and the mess of your life, even when it's uncomfortable and you feel unworthy? Will you walk the road with Jesus, even if it requires a trust that leads you out of your comfortable life and into difficult discipleship? Won't you get out of God's way this Holy Week? Won't you allow God to bring about your salvation, your redemption, and your healing in the way God wants?

This Holy Week we are called like Bartimaeus to throw off our cloaks, and in faith follow Jesus on the way. The calling of faith is to leave behind us all of our cut branches and cloaks for covering, whatever they may actually be. There's no need to cloak or cover Jesus's way in our own preferences for how God can work. It's true that God's method is not always safe or comfortable or easy, especially when that method is the cross, yet faith doesn't put barriers on how God is allowed to act or on where we will follow. The journey may be surprising. It may be unexpected and even treacherous. But God's way is the way that leads to salvation. Hosanna. God save us from our bondage to our own ways. The good news is, on the other side of that bondage, healing—our salvation—is what awaits.