

# In the Eye of the Storm

Mark 11: 1-11

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Palm Sunday

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church

1750 Virginia Road

San Marino, CA 91108

(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185

*www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com*

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Yesterday hundreds of thousands of young people throughout the country gathered in city streets to “March for Our Lives” The march was instigated by the survivors of the Marjorie Stoneman Douglass High School shooting several weeks ago in Parkland, Florida, where seventeen were killed. Both students and parents from the school participated and spoke at these marches that took place in Washington DC, in Los Angeles and San Francisco, in Miami and Chicago, Boston, Geneva, Cincinnati, and many other cities. Their message: “We are done hiding from gun violence and will stop at nothing to get adult politicians to finally prevent this from ever happening again.” It is an “anguished and defiant message,” according to *The New York Times*. And for many it is their first act of protest and the beginning of their political awakening. Whatever you happen to think of the effectiveness of their effort, you have to admit it is impressive that these high school students from Parkland, Florida have found their voice. They are doing whatever they can to prevent similar school shootings for other children, and families, and communities. I applaud their activism and their sense of agency. Change can happen but rarely without resistance.

Today we celebrate another march (or was it a parade?) in another capital city of the world as Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts and adulation of the crowds. By comparison it was a much smaller affair but it has certainly been remembered and re-enacted for thousands of years. It, too, was filled with political overtones, this Palm Sunday parade that protested the way things were for the sake of the way things should and could be. It, too, was an “anguished and defiant” message.

Though processions are common in church, parades are unusual. In fact, ordinarily the choir processes at the beginning of the morning worship service, except at this time of year during Lent. Lent is just a less celebratory time in the life of the Church. It is a time of penance and repentance, of self-examination, and thoughtful reconsideration of the sacrifice and suffering of our Lord on our behalf, and the mystery of what it all means. But on Palm Sunday there is a children’s parade with palm branches. The triumphant

entry of Jesus is also something of a funeral procession. The parade of Palm Sunday leads to a crucifixion.

Jack London, a famous 20th century author, wrote often about the Alaskan Gold Rush and the struggle for survival in the primitive and hostile environment of the arctic north. He used to be required reading for high school students and I loved the adventures that he wrote about. In one well known story, "To Build a Fire," London tells the story of a man on an arduous journey along the Yukon Trail in Northern Canada. The day is bitterly cold, and though already nine o'clock in the morning, it is still mostly dark. During the winter months, the sun rarely shines that close to the Arctic Circle. The story begins with the main character, a man with more courage than brains, who turns from the main path onto a little traveled trail eastward through the fat spruce timberland. He stops briefly to get his bearings, looks back at the landscape for a moment and surveys his situation. Except for a little dark hairline trail, there was only the unbroken, white frozen terrain as far as the eye could see. He imagines it must be about 50 degrees below zero. In actuality, it is much colder. London writes,

But all this, the mysterious, far-flung hairline trail, the absence of the sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer to the land, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such a fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon human frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and (humankind's) place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bit of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

The character in “To Build a Fire” eventually dies in that frozen tundra, unable to restart a fire as the cold slowly robs his capacity for any activity, in a world with little margin for error, alert only to the things of life but not the significances. “The trouble with him was that he was without imagination,” writes Jack London.

As Albert Einstein once said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Can you imagine life differently? Can you imagine life with greater purpose and sense of community with others? Can you imagine life empowered by an inexhaustible source of strength and love? Can you imagine a life transformed from timidity to courage and conviction? Palm Sunday and Holy Week invite us to be alert not only to the things but to the significances. The significance of riding into the eye of the storm, of confronting hatred and bigotry and evil, and all that robs human life of its meaning. Jesus revealed his identity amongst those who had lost theirs, among the sick, and rejected, and despised. He was recognized as the Lord of life by those who had been deprived of their humanity. The theology of the cross is paradoxical. It was not the devout but the sinners who recognized him, not the righteous but the unrighteous who understood the significance of what was happening and the reality of who he was, and is! One must abandon every self-justification if you are to recognize the God who reveals himself in the crucified Christ. Maybe that is why so many more people will be in church on Palm Sunday than on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday this week. We just prefer parades and victory speeches to crosses and the depths of human travail. He was despised and rejected, and acquainted with grief before the week is out.

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem in a carefully planned parade at the beginning of the Festival of Passover. He uncharacteristically drew attention to himself. Gone is the secrecy of his lordship and ambiguous statements about who he is. It is the fullness of time. No longer is he telling those healed not to talk about it. He is no longer slipping out of town just as the word is spreading about the amazing things he is doing and saying. Now he not only welcomes the adulation, he has planned for it! Even the stones along the road are about to shout out. This is the one moment in the sun before the darkness falls. He is in the eye of a cosmic storm – on Palm Sunday.

Before Jesus makes his way up that hill, where he is to be crucified later in the week in

another very different processional with crowds watching as he strains under the weight of his own cross, we have this interlude in the story with the crowds cheering his arrival in Jerusalem. It is a triumphant and joyous note but one that belies the danger and threat inherent in the situation. Jesus is received as a king when he enters Jerusalem, and yet this king is facing danger; this king is about to be conquered; this king comes not in strength with a mighty army but alone into the lion's den. He enters the storm that is brewing.

In a few days it all goes horribly wrong! This is a king's coronation in the capital, in the seat of civic and religious authority, but it is also a funeral procession known only to Jesus. This parade is a complex one with multiple meanings. And in a few days it all goes horribly wrong! We know what that is like — to have everything go wrong in no time at all. We know how tenuous success can be in life; how quickly institutions move on without us; how soon they forget. We know how fragile our health can be. One doctor's visit and somehow it all seems to have gone so horribly wrong! We know how quickly relationships can end, how soon a spouse can leave, a child become alienated, a lover become an enemy. In a few days it can all go horribly wrong.

Palm Sunday is about hope, but a darker hope than Easter. It is about hope in the midst of what C.S. Lewis called "the Shadowlands," the place where most of us live, also called the "valley of the shadow of death," as in the language of Psalm 23.

Jesus set out on a path to Jerusalem and walks right through the worst that human beings are capable of — apathy, hatred, betrayal, murder because that is what he came to do. That is what God always intends to do — to walk redemptively through all of human life even, and especially, when it goes horribly wrong. God is offering mercy and making peace; forging a way into the future that leads to celebration and joy. And in the face of what was about to happen, Jesus begins with a parade, as if to say, "The very worst of what is humanly possible cannot stop the grace of Almighty God!" The Apostle Paul put it this way: "Nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Jesus Christ. And nothing, not even death itself, can stop this parade through history, the parade (or is it a march?) of those who have discovered in this ruler, the Lord of life. Palm Sunday is an "anguished and defiant" message. It is a "March for Our Lives" that ends with only one still marching up the hill to Calvary, to save us — not himself.

This morning you may not feel like a conquering hero in life. In fact, you may feel like you've made a pretty good mess of things. Perhaps you are facing your life and problems alone or you're on the verge of being conquered by your compulsions, or loneliness, or fear of the future. Well, you are not alone! Jesus Christ walked right through the worst of life and can show us how to do it with him, in his strength. And God Almighty intends to walk with you through whatever you have to face, offering mercy and bringing peace. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you!

Planted as it is at the very center of our faith, the cross makes Christian faith radically and inescapably down-to-earth. By the cross, God declares deeper than any words, "There is no pain that you may bear that I have not born; there is no darkness that can overtake you that I have not seen; there is no fear that might grip you that I have not known. All that might come to you, I have passed through. And when you come to pass through the storm, know that I am with you." None of this explains away suffering; it's simply the sign in every age that God is with us. Through it all, God is with us!

But then of course, the cross is not the end of the story. But that's for next week. Thanks be to God! Amen