

Salty Covenants: Jesus

March 29, 2015 Mark 11:1-11

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This is always one of the hardest Sundays to preach. I often joke up here on Christmas and Easter that THOSE are the hardest to preach; 'what more can be said?' But in actuality, it is this day, Palm Sunday, that leaves me wanting for words. While there are huge theological themes that lurk within Christmas and Easter, what is the theme, what is the Good News, of today's text from Mark? How do I unpack Jesus' straightforward instructions to head into town, get a colt, bring it back, and then let's launch a fake parade into town?

But perhaps therein IS the message of this text. It is befuddling in its simplicity. Let's face it, this story from Mark is just a check-off list of who, what, when, where, why and how. The standards used for any invitation, notice, PR announcement. It is another stunning example of Mark's Dagnet approach to story telling; just the facts. You read this scripture, you listen to it, and if you are at all like me, you are left saying 'ok....so what?'. It has as much narrative pull as me telling you I walked to the train station from my house. I boarded the 7:47 and road into the city. When I got there, I looked around, then took the next train home. So what, you would probably say? So what?

And that is where Mark catches us. He sets this trap that seems so simple, so innocent. A day in the life of Jesus. A boring day in the life of Jesus. Nothing really happens. There are not angry Pharisees challenging him. There are no blind men begging to see. There are no hungry people fed in abundance. There aren't even any sermons or teachings. It seems like such a tame story compared to the other stories in the Gospels. Perhaps this is why it has come to be so associated with children taking part in its re-enactment. It is a safe little children's story with no need to be tidied up or have the sharp edges smoothed out. There isn't anything in this story that we will have to explain with discomfort to our children. Or is there?

I have come to appreciate that the seeming innocence of this story is where its power lies. We think it holds little value, just a sweet story of Jesus creating his own sad parade. By the time we get here during Lent, we are tired. The themes and daily practices of Lent are growing heavier. We breath easily in this light story. It is a change of pace, a change of mood. It seems refreshing and up-lifting. Finally, the burden of Lent seems to be easing. Easter is coming.

HA! We are caught. Easter may be coming, but in other ways it is far far off. We are lulled into the unchallenging aspects of today's Gospel. But in reality, we will be suffering whiplash within a few short days. The rug will be pulled out from under us, we will be left shaking our heads and asking, 'Wait....what about that funky parade just a few days ago?' Our misunderstandings of this day will glare at us from the shadow of the cross.

It is in that misunderstanding, that duplicitous nature of this event, that we find our message, and our lure. Jesus' friends think this is a day that celebrates him as King. They think this day is about his recognition, finally, as the messiah who will rescue them. We think this is a quiet sweet day that is about waving leaves from trees that don't grow anywhere near where we live. In reality, this is the day that begins to shake the world.

This is the beginning of the end. But no one sees it yet. Well, perhaps Jesus sees it. Mark is clear that by this point, Jesus has tried to tell his friends that this whole thing is not going to end

well. They are on a runaway train that won't stop until it crashes. But his friends have failed, been unable?, to hear and understand this repeated message. And so they wave their branches with as much ignorant bliss as we do.

Perhaps that is a bit unfair. Their enthusiasm is also rife with hope. They have the plot of this Jesus guy all worked out in their heads. He is riding into town to once and for all claim his place in their history. He is riding into town to save the Jewish people, to restore them to the rightful rulers of their own land. Yes, they are filled with hope.

And we may be filled with hope as well, as we sit here over 2000 years later. Hope that perhaps this year, the story will be different. Hope that perhaps the atrocities of Holy Week don't really need to happen. Hope that maybe we can write a different story; one that still ends with the joy of Easter, but without the horror of Good Friday. It is knowing what is coming that may cause some of our need to simplify this day, to make it about a joyous triumphal entry.

The thing is, knowing what is coming, knowing how things turn out, is both a gift and a burden. Many of you may remember the annual airing of *The Wizard of Oz* on television. Every year, all the kids in the neighborhood would wait with great anticipation for the night the movie would be on. We would count down the days, we would begin chanting 'we're off to see the wizard' along with 'we are the lollypop kids' which of course seemed fitting to us, given our size. And every year the same thing would happen. I would get settled into our little tv room, watch as the tornado struck and the mean old lady rode her bike through Dorothy's dreams. I would laugh when the house landed in colorful munchkinland. I couldn't wait to see those red and white stockinged feet curl up when the ruby red slippers were taken off and given to Dorothy. You see, I watched it every year, I knew what was coming.

And then would come those dang flying monkeys. And every year, never fail, they would scare the daylights out of me. I can distinctly remember crawling behind the couch, trying to escape from them. Every year. And every year, my folks would say to me 'what are you afraid of? you know what will happen? why are you scared?' Indeed, why? But every year, those flying monkeys did me in, even though I knew they were coming, even though I knew how the whole story would end.

That is the power of story in our lives. Even when we know the story, even when we know it is just a movie, even when we have heard about the cross and the empty tomb before, the power of the story lies in experiencing it. When we enter the story we give it permission to transform us. When we allow ourselves to experience all of the story, from the spinning tornado, to the terrifying flying monkeys, to the witch who melts under the splash of water, we see the richness of the tale, but also how our lives may be informed by it. What good, really, would *The Wizard of Oz* have been, without those flying monkeys? How much sweeter was victory and safety for Dorothy, when we realized what dangers she had really been in. Sure, the movie would have been easier to watch without those awful monkeys. But the virtues of Dorothy's success over the wicked witch, and her own fears, would have been worth about a nickel.

The same is true of the story we enter today. It is just the beginning of the end. Well, actually, it is the beginning of the end of the beginning. The danger in today's story is its simplicity and seeming lack of depth. The danger lies in its ability to distract us from what is really going on, and what is about to happen. And since we know what is about to happen, we may be tempted to think that is enough. We may decide we've been this road before, there is no changing the

story, and so I will just show up again next Sunday, for the joyous music and the pretty decorations, the Easter finery and fun.

But I ask you, what will that empty tomb really mean, if you decide you don't need to experience the entire story? How much can resurrection mean, when we have not cried at the foot of the cross. Yes, you may very well know what is coming this week. But there is so much more to a story, to a journey, than knowing the plot.

The thing is, we want to spare Jesus. We want to yell out from the parade route; don't go there, don't enter the city. Take a little vacation this week. Believe us, this is not where you want to be right now. But that isn't how this story goes, indeed it's not how things in life go. For reasons we cannot know or understand, the world is full of danger and terror. But it is also full of love and beauty. And so really, rewriting this story, evading the events of Thursday and Friday, don't do us any good. They don't help us understand the redemption and transformation that is ours through this next week. Because each and every one of us will experience our own Good Fridays. No one gets through this life without some flying monkeys. The more we enter and experience the events of this Holy Week, the better able we are to withstand our own Good Friday experiences, with our eyes fixed on Easter.

And so I invite you into this holy week with me. Take time each day to spend with the rest of Mark's gospel. Just pick up where we left off today, chapter 11, verse 12. You will find the story splinters nicely into the days of the week. Tomorrow morning you will find Jesus back in the temple. He has slept outside the city gates, and returned after pondering what he observed today. Remember, the text ended today with these words:

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

Tomorrow morning, what he pondered overnight, will cause him to turn over the money changers in the temple and really set tempers flaring. He will preach on another day of this week, all sorts of telling stories and instructions. He will dine with friends and be anointed by the woman with the alabaster jar. And then it will be Thursday. And the Passover will begin. And then things will go from bad to worse in a matter of hours. Then the events of today will be cloudy and confusing and perhaps a distant foggy memory in their minds. That will take you through chapter 15. Stop there.

And then come and join us here on Thursday, Maundy Thursday, evening at 7:30. We will enter the stories of the week that take us from today to the foot of the cross. We will experience once again the joy of the last supper as well as the terror and agony of betrayal and death. None of us like to enter the dark. We avoid suffering and look for ways around trials and tribulations. But remember Dorothy and those flying monkeys. If you want to really truly experience Easter Sunday, you need to experience the whole roller coaster whiplashing story. And then when Good Friday visits your own personal life, you will know that it might be Friday, but Sunday's coming! Amen.