

A Different Kind of King

Matthew 2:1-11

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

March 29, 2021

I like the staff's idea of bringing a cutting from a plant in our yards in lieu of a palm frond to wave on Palm Sunday in this pandemic year. Earlier this morning I went into the yard and broke off a branch from one of several flowering cherry trees – like the ones on the mall in Washington. They are in full bloom, and they would have been perfect for a celebratory parade if Jesus had triumphantly entered Winston-Salem instead of Jerusalem.

Breaking the branches off the cherry trees reminded me of an incident at youth camp forty-five years ago when I was pastor at Lake Shore. One year Browning Ware, pastor of First Baptist Church, Austin, was the camp pastor for high school week, which meant that he led a large group meeting every morning. We met in a facility that had a roof, but the walls were open, so you could get a panoramic view of the surroundings.

One morning Browning took his place at the front of the meeting room and stood silently for a minute or so, his eyes scanning the out of doors. Presently, his eyes focused on a tree just outside the building. He asked one of the campers to go outside and break a branch off the tree and bring it to him. The eyes of a hundred campers and staffers tracked the young man as he went outside, broke off a branch and handed it to the pastor.

Browning studied the branch for a moment, while the rest of us watched in rapt attention, wondering what he was up to. Then he said, "What I want to know is: Is this branch alive or dead?"

More than four decades later I remember that incident at Camp Brownwood in detail, but for the life of me I can't recall what Browning's point was. It was like telling someone about your favorite commercial, the one that is so funny, but you can't remember the product it advertises. What I recall is that it was the consensus of the group that the branch was alive – but dying. Like these beautiful cherry blossoms.

Palm Sunday is a curious observance. Each year we gather to sing praise and lift our hosannas, pretending that we don't know that in five days from his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem Jesus would be dead.

The crowd that welcomed him to the Holy City and sang his praises didn't know that, of course. But there is ample evidence that he knew full well what lay ahead.

To this point his ministry had been spontaneous. He responded to requests or challenges. A leper approached him and said, "If you choose, you can make clean," and Jesus said, "I do choose," and he healed the man. (Matthew 8:1-4) A Roman centurion said to Jesus, "My servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." Jesus said, "I will come and cure him." (Matthew 8:5-13) There are many other examples.

There is a point in Luke's telling of the story where Jesus makes a conscious decision to go to Jerusalem for Passover. "*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" (9:51) This was a decision thoughtfully, deliberately made. He set his face toward Jerusalem with purpose. And perhaps with a plan.

Once his decision was made, there was an intentionality and an intensity about his ministry, as Burt Burleson pointed out a couple of Wednesday nights ago.

Several times Jesus took his disciples aside and told them what was ahead: he would be betrayed into the hands of the religious leaders who would turn him over to the Romans who would execute him.

As Jesus approached the city, he told two of his disciples to go ahead to a small village and there they would find a donkey. Untie it, he told them, and bring it back. (I have always wondered how he knew there would be a donkey waiting and that it would be tied?) Then he gave the two disciples specific instructions about what to say. The exact words. If the owner says, "What are you doing taking my donkey?" just say, "The Lord needs it," and the owner will say, "Oh, okay." In any other situation the owner would say, "You can't just walk in here and say, 'The Lord needs your donkey,' and walk off with it. Who's paying?" Sounds like a plan to me.

Why a donkey? I can't think of another time Jesus rode a donkey. Why this time? This is why I am convinced that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was carefully planned. Jesus knew that the pilgrims who traveled to Jerusalem from around the Mediterranean for Passover were biblically literate. The sight of Jesus riding a donkey into the city would ring a bell in the back of their minds. They might have to struggle for a moment, but they would recall Zechariah's prophecy about a king who would one day come and deliver the people. "*Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.*"

If they made that connection, they would also recall the verses that followed, verses that described a king who was as different from Roman might and domination as one could imagine.

*He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim (one of Israel's tribes)
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 wanted people to associate him with the peace-preaching, battle-bow breaking king in the ancient prophecy. For he was a different kind of king and his was a different kind of kingdom. It was not a kingdom attained and maintained by power, violence, and oppression. It was a kingdom where swords would be turned into plowshares and peace would be preached to the nations of the world.

That is the statement Jesus was making the day he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on the first Palm Sunday.

But let us not crown him king yet. For the demonstration is not over.

Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that the very first thing Jesus did after entering the city was to go straight to the temple where he famously overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the stalls where animals were sold.

It seems like a spontaneous response of Jesus to seeing the financial transactions that were going in the courtyard of the temple.

But Mark includes a critical detail in his telling of the story. Mark says that Jesus went to the temple, "*looked around at everything,*" but "*as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*" (Mark 11:11) He saw what was going on, but it was late,

which suggests that there probably weren't many people there. If you're going to have a demonstration, you need a crowd. So, he left the temple, went to a nearby village where he spent the night, came back the next day when there were more people in the temple, and that is when he made a shambles of the place.

The "cleansing of the temple," like the "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, was a planned demonstration. Jesus knew there would be money changers and animal sellers in the temple, because he had seen them the day before. Jesus was making a statement. And the statement was not simply about selling animals or changing money, both of which were necessary to worship in the temple. He charged that the temple had become a den of thieves. A thieves' den is not where they commit their crimes; it is where they go after they have committed their crimes. Jesus said that the temple had become a thieves' hideout. The temple itself, which was supposed to be a "*house of prayer for all nations*," had become corrupt. That is what Jesus was protesting.

This was a deliberate confrontation. Jesus could have got a parade permit and marched around waving signs. Instead, like the prophets before him -- like Jeremiah and Ezekiel -- he paired his prophetic words with a provocative prophetic act.

That, according to Mark's Gospel, is when the powers that be knew that Jesus had to die. (11:18) According to one source, the chief priest, fearing the chaos that Jesus' followers might create during Passover, bringing down Rome's wrath, told the Sanhedrin (city council), "It is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to die."

When Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and chased the animals out of their stalls, he was alive -- never more alive -- but, like these cherry blossoms, his fate was sealed.

The kingdom Jesus came to announce is a peaceable kingdom, but it is not always a kingdom at peace. Indeed, it is rarely a kingdom at peace. That is because it is also a righteous kingdom, a just kingdom, a kingdom set in perpetual opposition to powers that dominate and dehumanize, especially to religion that aligns itself with power and corruption.

We cannot pretend that we don't know what is going to happen on Good Friday. We know what is going to happen. We also know what's going to happen on Easter Sunday. But we must not hurry past Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. For it is in the week that separates Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday that we see the passion that powered Jesus' life and may have led to his death.

"*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*," he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "*for they shall be called children of God.*" That was his passion, and that was his promise to all those who take up his cross and follow him. Amen.