

“A Community in Christ, Apart from a Sinful Crowd”

based on Mark 11:1-11, Isaiah 53 and Mark 14:27-15:47

Delivered on March 28, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Today’s readings present for us a contrast between being a follower and being a leader, and between being part of a crowd and being part of a community called out for a purpose. They offer a contrast between being a part of the world and changing the world. If we are to accept our covenant with God through Jesus our Lord and King, our calling is to be leaders, part of a community to change the world.

In these readings, we see the failure of being a follower, part of a crowd, living by the priorities of this world. Mark’s gospel shows our covenant with Jesus, as an act of liberation, a new exodus, just like the one that Isaiah describes, led by the suffering servant.

Before I take us through a brief reflection on our long readings from today, let me start by calling attention to a disconnect some of you may be having, because I have just called out the failure of being a ‘follower’ a few weeks after, we just read about Jesus saying, ‘take up your cross and follow me.’ But I want to remind you, as we have seen, that God’s covenants are a call to be in partnership with God, to walk with God. Even the word Mark uses when Jesus says ‘follow,’ means to walk on the same road with someone, not to follow, dragged along by a crowd, but inspired to walk the same steps. In this case, it is to walk humbly, with our God.

And so, to be a follower of Jesus is to receive and accept our covenant partnership with him, to share in what Paul, who was Mark’s first mentor, called the ‘reconciling ministry.’ More accurately it might be called ‘the reconciling service,’ by which we share in God’s work, through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to bring light and life to every family for God’s glory.

Following Jesus is not the same as following a crowd. Following Jesus is about knowing you are free from sin, that he has paid a ransom, a price for your liberty. This is so that you and I will turn to him, repent, change our minds to believe, that in Jesus, God is with us, God is with this church, and God is with you.

I’m reminded of the many times my parents would say ‘no’ to me, that I could not do something. Usually, it was something that my friends were doing, but for some reason I was not allowed to join them. I would use my friends as an argument for why I should be allowed to go, and they would say, *‘If everyone was jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you do it?’* In other words, just because my crowd of friends was doing something, it didn’t mean that it was wise to do it, or that I needed to do it.

In today’s readings, we see the influence of the crowd, time and time again, over against the leadership of Jesus. In the first reading, we see Mark foreshadow the purpose of Jesus’s triumphant entry, in the words he uses to describe the young donkey being bound up and being freed. Like the donkey, we are bound in sin, and freed to be called to serve our Lord. What’s more, as Zechariah predicted, Jesus does not enter on a war horse. He is not a warlord. He

enters in peace, on a beast of burden. The gathered crowd, oppressed by Rome, wants freedom. And so, for them, it is a kind of protest moment, and Jesus has come to liberate them.

In this instance, being swept up in the crowd, the people are in the right to be praising Jesus, but the crowd is fickle. I'd venture to say, that all crowds are indeed fickle. Within a week, the crowds in the street are crying out for something different, now, they are egged on by those manipulating them for their own power. The people cry out, 'Give us Barabbas!' and 'Crucify Him!' The second crowd rejects Jesus, and wants Rome to kill him, and give them back a man who is a rebel and murderer.

In this moment, it is important to remember what our expectations are of Jesus in our lives. Because, in these texts we see the people first wanting Jesus to be a king like David, but like Judas they sell him out when Jesus does not meet their expectations. The name Barabbas in Aramaic means 'Son of a Father,' and he is a rebel. Each of us is the child of a father, and in sin, we are rebellious. The crowd chooses one like them and call for Jesus to die in his place.

Indeed, this is as Isaiah's prophecy predicted, that the arm of the Lord, the revealed presence and power of God in the suffering servant, was not much to see, that he would be overlooked, despised and rejected, held in no value, to suffer and die for us, killed in our place.

As we head to Easter, now is a good time for us all to ask ourselves, 'Who is Jesus to me?' Is Jesus just a teacher, one who challenges us and calls us to love, often by our own definitions of love? Is Jesus a conqueror, one who we expect to overthrow all these evildoers around us? Is Jesus a magician, one who will give us whatever our heart desires? Is Jesus a ruthless judge, waiting to punish evildoers, or even us, if we sin? Is Jesus a friend, who gives us permission to do whatever we want and follow our hearts?

Friends, each of these may hold some parts of the truth, but the Jesus Mark writes about, the Jesus all the New Testament writers reveal to us, is not any one of these. Jesus is a leader, who does what we could not do, and so he does it on our behalf. He is the crucified King, God's good news, who calls us to turn away from sin, to walk with him to the cross, die to ourselves and our own identities, and receive our salvation in him. He empowers us to share in his service and his love, now and forever.

Indeed, this is why God shared in our humanity in Jesus, the Messiah, to be the suffering servant, who lived as we live, bearing our sins on that cross, to die for us, in our place, to conquer sin and death, and to be our example, showing us the lengths to which love will go, even for those who are completely undeserving. We see the fullness of what it means to be a human in Jesus, even as we recognize him to be our God sharing in our flesh. For it is by God sharing in our life, we share in God's life, to know God's love in full, and share it with others. By this we reconcile this broken world in and through him.

We are called to be leaders, empowered by this good news, to walk with Jesus to the cross. We are empowered to love without fear. We are empowered by the knowledge that God is with us. This is not 'with us' so we are looking over our shoulders always afraid he'll judge us, and it is

not 'with us' to stand next to us passively and give us permission to do whatever we want. Rather, God is 'with us' to make us bold, to do what is right, knowing that in our efforts to love we are always accompanied by our God by our side, and so, in the mistakes we make, God is still 'with us.' It is by grace, not perfection, we show God's love, a love that will and has in many ways already begun to transform this broken world.

Friends, the crowd is always going to be fickle – Crowds expect followers to fit the mold. Crowds want us to be concerned about being seen and judged as worthy to belong. The crowd asks that we conform to go along for the ride, wherever it may go. Peter went after Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest, but he found comfort with the officers, to warm himself by the fire. Yet, there the crowd recognized that he was not one of them, so, he denied Jesus, trying to fit in, so as to stay there. You see, he went with Jesus up to a point, not all the way, until the cock crowed and he remembered. That is when Peter wept in repentance.

Friends, the church can often behave like a crowd, for even believers are pulled into crowds, both in and outside of the church, because we forget our calling to be a community. God calls individuals to be the church, to be a community with only one destination: The cross, where our Lord died for us, because the resurrection follows it. We do not have to be judged worthy to belong in God's reign, because while we were still sinners is when Christ died for us. The reign of God is the community we are called to be. It is about bringing our brokenness to each other, because together we share in God's love and are aware together of God's presence.

Friends, as a church, we must be a community headed toward the cross and resurrection. We are not called to be a crowd, looking for popularity and power, or for comfort. Jesus shows us what it means to be fully human, sharing his pain in the garden, bringing his disciples to see him in his full humanity, to watch him in his suffering. They even see his asking for the cup, the cross, the throne of God, to be taken from him. Here we see Jesus, vulnerable, enduring as we might, the reality that he faces, by praying a prayer of lament, echoed by his cry of abandonment on the cross, *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

I want to encourage you all on this Palm Sunday, to consider this Jesus we see before us. The Jesus who being equal with God, humbled himself to share in our humanity, obedient even to a shameful death on a cross, counted among the lawless with a punishment for slaves and rebels, feeling as we would feel, the dread of the moment he faces. But he faces it with friends in prayer, with honesty, and with love. It is by his wounds that we, who are sinners, are healed, forgiven and embraced, called into service. It is in the making of his life an offering for sin, that we are made heirs to his kingdom.

Friends, on this road to Easter, let us separate ourselves from the crowds of this world, and walk in partnership with the God who loves us enough to have become one of us, that by our walking with Jesus leading us to the cross, we might be empowered to endure challenges in this life, even being mocked as he was mocked, and rise with him, to be a leader in making this world a better place. We do this by loving Jesus, our God in our humanity, with all we have, and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Like the disciples who scattered, but came back together to witness the resurrected Jesus, we have an opportunity in these difficult times to come together, as a community to love and serve one another, and love and serve those who we encounter, and to be honest about our struggles with sin and with this world around us. We allow others to be honest with us, brave enough to share without judgement, the love of God, which is seen most vividly in the mercy of our God in Jesus on the cross.

We have an opportunity to look at the cross, which is a symbol of death, and see that this cross brings for us new life – a resurrected life that has already and will continue to change the world, through a community, the universal church, that God has called to live with love and selfless service in confidence that God is with us. The Kingdom of God is now, and the cross is the throne of Jesus. The Kingdom of God is within you, it is in the church, and it is yet to come in its fulness when he returns. Rejoice! My friends. Be empowered by this good news because this is truly good news! Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 11:1-11 (Pastor's Translation) When they came near to Jerusalem, into Bethpage and ***Bethany***, near the ***Mount*** of Olives, ***Jesus*** sent out two of his disciples, ***commanding*** them, "***Depart*** into the village in ***front*** of you and immediately on ***entering*** into it, you will find a young donkey having been bound up, upon which no ***human*** has yet sat. Free it and ***bring*** it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this? Say, 'Because its Lord has need of it and ***immediately***, he will send it ***back*** here.'" And they departed and ***found*** the young ***donkey*** having been ***bound*** at the outside ***entrance***, by the street, and they ***freed*** it. And some of those there ***standing*** around were saying to them, 'What are you doing freeing this ***young donkey***?' And the ***disciples spoke*** to them as Jesus said, so, they sent them with it. And the disciples led the young donkey to Jesus, and threw on it their ***cloaks***, and he ***sat*** on it. And the cloaks of many of them were ***spread*** on the road, but others ***put*** down ***branches***, having been ***cut*** down from the ***fields***. And those going before and those on the ***road*** following, were crying out, '***Hosanna!*** Blessed is the One ***coming*** in the name of the Lord! ***Blessed*** is the coming ***Kingdom*** of our ***father David!*** Hosanna in the ***highest!***' And he entered into ***Jerusalem***, he went into the ***temple***, and after looking around at all of it, already being the late ***hour***, he went out to Bethany with the ***twelve***.