

**Jesus: A Movement Leader**  
**Mark 11:1-11**  
**Rev. Kim S. Vidal**

Prayer: God of parades and celebrations, as we shout “Hosanna!” like those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, remind us that Hosanna is a word of praise and salvation in many forms. Let us send the same messages of Hosanna to our world in need of your love. Amen.

*Laissez les bon temps rouler!* Let the good times roll! Mardi Gras, the Annual Carnival in New Orleans, is a grandiose parade held on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. On my recent travel to New Orleans, I visited Mardi Gras World, a huge warehouse, now a tourist attraction, that stores colourful floats and elaborate bits and pieces of decorations that were used in the Mardi Gras parade. The visit to Mardi Gras World starts with a 10-minute video clip that explains the history of this carnival that started as early as 1699. During the Mardi Gras Carnival, New Orleans is consumed by a giant party. Parades, drinking, dancing and music, throwing of beads, candies and small toys are all over the place. It was one hoot of a party!

In the Christian calendar today, we are celebrating a look-like Mardi Gras parade in the first century Jerusalem world. The city was alive, vibrant, multicultural, international, technical, exciting. Every possible hotel room was rented at a premium price. Tourists, pilgrims and gate crashers were identifiable by their clothing, their accents and manners... how they roamed up and down the streets, pausing, gazing, pointing, asking. Merchants and vendors sell their wares--exotic foods and drinks, bling-bling and trinkets, of all sorts. Busker musicians and street performers entertain in every corner of the city. The atmosphere sizzles and is abuzz with life. Then suddenly, the crowd heard trumpeters blowing their instruments, signaling the start of a procession. Perhaps not just one parade, but two.

On the north side of the city, Jesus and his peasant followers participated in a Passover procession known today as the Palm Sunday parade! Jesus, the movement leader riding on a lowly donkey, leads this parade. There were red carpets of cloaks laid on the ground. People, including children, waved leafy branches and colorful ribbons chanting praise of some sort. Hosanna! They shouted, which means “God save us!”.

On the west side of the city, there was the sound of a brass band and the clacking hooves of large horses and metal armor coming from a parade of the Roman army led by Governor Pontius Pilate and the VIPs of Jerusalem. With crowds of devout Jews flowing into Jerusalem to celebrate their liberation from Egypt, the Roman leaders would put on a display of force, of pomp and circumstance, to deter the Jews from getting too exuberant about the possibility of a rebellion. Pilate's procession was the visible manifestation of Imperial Roman power - a show of strength designed to prevent any outbreaks of insurgency or violent rebellion against Roman rule. In a show of military force, the second parade included, "*the sound of marching soldiers on foot, cavalry on horses, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold.*" As the powerful Pilate rode astride his horse, one can smell fear from the resentful onlookers. Yes! It's Mardi Gras in Jerusalem that day at a chaotic pace. But that celebration was short-lived because death is lurking somewhere in that happy parade. Somewhere in the carnival crowds, the angel of death awaits Jesus, the movement leader.

The story of that first Palm Sunday parade was captured by the 4 gospel writers. Mark, who wrote the account some 50 years after the event, tells us that Jesus' parade into Jerusalem was not a spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment event. Mark spends more time telling us about the preparations for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem than about the event itself. It would seem that Jesus intentionally set himself in stark contrast with the other procession coming into town - to contrast the empire of Rome with that of God's reign. In Mark, Jesus assigns two of his disciples to get an unriden colt. The word "unriden" is important. It signifies that Jesus as the leader had divine and human authority who would bring true peace and transformation to the people. The two disciples are instructed to go into the village, and they'll see and take this unriden colt and, if anyone asks them about it, they are to give the "secret password": "The Lord needs it." Theologian John Petty claims that: "It appears there was a network of Jesus supporters operating "under the radar." The Galilee-based Jesus movement reaches even into Judea, even to the very gates of the city of Jerusalem itself!"

By the time the writer of Matthew and Luke gets around to telling the story, some 60 or 70 years after the event, the colt in Luke becomes a donkey. Matthew can't seem to decide

between a colt and a donkey, so Matthew has the disciples bring both a donkey and a colt and Jesus sits on them and rides them into Jerusalem. I wonder how Jesus did that! Mark and Matthew used leafy branches. Luke doesn't have any branches at all. Cloaks in the 3 accounts were laid out to make Jesus' ride easier, as in the other accounts, and there's singing, too, but these are not the voices of a fickle crowd that will change its mind in a few days and call for Jesus' crucifixion. No, these praises burst forth from a crowd of Jesus' followers, who have followed him throughout his ministry.

In John, written some 70 to 80 years after the event, the leafy branches became leaves of palm trees. Waving palm branches in ancient times was a tradition that conquering military leaders were welcomed home from battle. The writer John hints that Jesus is a conquering hero and this particular parade is an ironic antithesis to a military parade. As the crowd waved these branches in that procession, the crowd chanted words from Psalm 118: "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord." Hosanna means "save us" in Hebrew. That phrasing was typically followed with the words: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Hosanna! Save us! From what? It was clear what they needed to save from. The first century, people longed for freedom: freedom from the brutality of their Roman rulers, freedom from the ravages of poverty, freedom from the strict oppression of their religious authorities, freedom from the fear of illness and death.

These historical details are utterly significant as we understand the meaning of Palm Sunday. The gospel writers wanted to give their readers an impression of who Jesus was, using words and images based on Jewish scriptures and traditions. What are we, 21st century Christians to do with Palm Sunday? Why do we wave our palm branches and shout our hosannas? What do we need to be saved from? Following Jesus, the movement leader, means acknowledging that Jesus is offering freedom in many forms: freedom from the bigotry and hypocrisy of our culture; freedom from our obsession with material goods; freedom from hatred, freedom from the injustice we would perpetrate, freedom from violence we would inflict upon others. The salvation that Jesus continues to offer is the freedom to embody the Spirit of God, which is love. Jesus is offering us the freedom to save ourselves from ourselves. Jesus is pointing to a

way of being in the world that proclaims: if you want to discover God's presence in your life, be a peace-maker, forgive, be generous, be compassionate.

Well, it seems to me that no matter how you look at the story of this amazing procession into Jerusalem, you can't help but see the image of Jesus, the movement leader who offers us a choice between the power of an oppressive empire and the power of God's love. An oppressive empire's power is displayed through the wonder and attraction of military power, the use of force, fear and violence. God's love displayed by Jesus and his peasant followers is the nonviolence, compassionate and just dominion of God, one that counters the violence of the empire. Which parade would you attend?

Holy Week reminds us how easily we are distracted and fooled by fancier parades like Mardi Gras and empty, fleeting promises of joy. Sometimes it's really difficult to know which parade to attend. A 21st century progressive Christian preacher who calls herself Pastor Dawn has this to say which I find very interesting: "It's so easy to simply get caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds and join the processions which have the loudest brass bands or the most elaborate floats or the greatest number of celebrities or the most charismatic political leaders. It's easy to miss the counter-procession that is taking place on the other side of town—the one where Jesus is riding on a humble donkey, claiming dominion, not by violence, but by courageous, loving, serving and accepting his place among the victims of imperial power... Jesus' power does not come from domination or oppression, but rather flows from love and service... Peace is won without a sword, and being human claims greater value than wealth or fame. While Pontius Pilate processed into town with a showcase of intimidation and glinting armor astride a handsome war horse, Jesus processed unarmed, unflanked, on the back of a borrowed colt."

On this Palm Sunday, in this one moment, we can make way for Jesus, we can throw our cloaks on the ground with humility and sing our songs of hosannas with gusto, and trust our uncertain future to a loving God who works well in every circumstance and in every holy week of our lives. Please repeat after me: Hosanna! Blessed is Jesus - the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen.

Sources: For this sermon, I am most indebted and inspired by the writings of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg (*The Last Week*); the sermons of Pastor Dawn and the Rev. Dr. Nancy Taylor; and the reflections of Nancy Rockwell, John Petty and Alyce Mackenzie.