



# “The Beginning of the End”

Text: Matthew 21:1-17

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

**Palm/Passion Sunday**  
**April 14, 2019**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

One of the hardest things about growing up is growing past some of the stories you were taught and accepted at face value. When I was a little boy, growing up in Sunday School as many children did in those days, we were quick to believe everything our teachers told us, especially if they were stories that had fancy pictures or a flannel board presentation. (For those of you younger than me, flannel board presentations were the forerunner to PowerPoint.) We were wholesale, literal believers of whatever we were taught.

Then, as time passed, some of us went on to college and took religion classes and some of us went completely off the deep end and went to seminary, where everything we ever believed was called into question. Along the way, some of that wholesale, literal acceptance of what we had been taught as children was chipped away - as it should have been.

Case in point: the Palm Sunday parade. When I was a little boy, the story was that as Jesus entered Jerusalem, a spontaneous celebration burst forth from the crowds as he was welcomed into the city. Palm branches were cut down and waved as Jesus passed by. Everyone went wild with excitement as Jesus rode the donkey.

But then, I read books and took classes and listened to lectures. In Matthew's gospel, from which we read this year, there is no mention of palms. There is mention that "others cut branches from the trees" but it doesn't say "palms." Mark writes of "leafy branches." Luke tells us that people were "spreading their cloaks on the road." The palm branches are only mentioned in John's gospel. Why such discrepancies?

Matthew has the story of the entrance into Jerusalem connected to the Passover celebration. Passover was a pilgrim festival, which meant that Jewish men were expected to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. Undoubtedly, their families accompanied them. Mark and Luke also have the entry into Jerusalem as the precursor to the celebration of Passover. John also speaks of the Passover, but John never speaks of a Passover celebration, but of Jesus washing his disciples' feet and calling himself the "bread of life" and "the true vine."

It is also true that, as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have pointed out, there was another entry into Jerusalem at the same time Jesus was entering. Coming in from Caesarea Maritima was the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who was traveling to Jerusalem, along with a well-armed contingent of imperial soldiers, in a well-planned display of military might, reminding all of those pilgrims who were under Roman occupation that any notion of beginning a rebellion could be quickly and decisively quelled. Roman control and imperial theology - in which Caesar was Lord - was on full display and the God of Israel was helpless to do anything about it. Or so it was thought.

In the Temple were religious leaders who had colluded with the imperial authorities. The religious leaders lived at a level of privilege and comfort that was far above the common folk who were in their care and keeping. The people were aware of this unholy partnership, but were powerless to do anything about it.

So, you have Jerusalem at the time of a pilgrim festival, uncomfortably full of people - perhaps as much as five times the normal population - who had traveled to celebrate the Passover, the heavy-handed presence of the imperial authority in the person of the detested Pontius Pilate, and the revolutionary rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus being welcomed as the Savior and Redeemer of his people - and that was understood in political terms more than spiritual terms. What could possibly go wrong?

After the entry into Jerusalem, Matthew tells us that Jesus went to the Temple where, we are told, he "drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." If Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a challenge to the imperial power, Jesus' actions in the Temple were a direct challenge to the religious powers.

Back in my flannel-graph Sunday School days, we were taught that the Temple had become like a shopping center. But upon closer examination, the exchange of money was a legitimate occupation, because Roman coinage was forbidden in the Temple precincts and had to be changed to the silver shekels accepted in the Temple. Animals were required for Temple sacrifice. Most people couldn't bring an animal with them, so an industry developed of people selling animals for sacrifice. Could that alone have been what upset Jesus?

Or could it be that the Temple, by the time of Jesus, had also become the center of the empire's system of taxation? The tax records were stored in the Temple. The tithe was collected and used for Temple upkeep and the care of the priests. The empire used the collection system to benefit itself, turning the Temple into the ancient equivalent of the Internal Revenue Service and you know how most people think about that on the eve of tax day.

So, when Jesus goes on his rampage and says, "My house shall be a house of prayer" - which you can see on our cornerstone is from the prophecy of Isaiah - but you are making it a den of robbers" - which is from the prophecy of Jeremiah - he is saying that the Temple has become a safe place for criminals to hide. Who are the criminals? Maybe not the money changers and animals sales force, but those religious leaders who have cozied up to the imperial authorities. Maybe Jesus is far angrier with those who watered-down and twisted the commandments for their own benefit, than he was angry with those who were doing their necessary work.

I had a woman at my last church who, every Palm Sunday, fussed at me because I didn't make a big deal out of the triumphalism of the story. "It's the greatest day in the Bible," she would tell me. Kind of made me wonder what she thought of Easter and Christmas.

If Palm Sunday isn't a big, rah-rah, whoop-de-doo day, what is it? And why should we even notice it or care about it 2,000 years later?

One possible answer is that it tells us a lot about Jesus and how he understood his mission. Jesus was not afraid of confronting the injustice of the empire or the Temple. Jesus was not afraid of standing up for God's way. Jesus was not afraid of defending the poor. Jesus was not intimidated by speaking truth to power.

And neither should his disciples. You and I are not called to cower in the face of injustice and unrighteousness. You and I are not given the option to remain quiet while others oppress and dominate those whose skin is a different shade, whose nationality is not our own, or whose struggles and skirmishes have left their scars. You and I are not called to bend God's commandments and course to fit our circumstances or our politics.

Jesus traveled a pathway of extreme and unshakable faithfulness. It was that faithfulness to God that put him in conflict with those who sought to use their power and privilege for their own benefit. It was that faithfulness to God that led him to challenge the misuse of authority. It was that faithfulness to God that kindled his anger toward those who abused their power and position to their own benefit while trampling on the lives and opportunities of those beneath them.

Of Jesus, the author of the Letter to the Philippians said,

And being found in human form he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

*(Phil. 2:8)*

Obedience to God and faithfulness to God's way are not always popular, safe, or comfortable. When our discipleship fits in with the way things are, risks nothing, or is barely distinguishable from the world around us, we have left the way of Jesus behind and are not worthy to be called his disciples. When we fail to live our discipleship in tension with the way of the world around us, we are like those disciples in the garden, who, rather than standing with Jesus, fled from him into the darkness.

That is why Palm Sunday is really the beginning of the end. Jesus had no illusions about what would happen to him if he traveled to Jerusalem. He was fully aware of the confrontation that awaited him there and that he was powerless to stop what was already in motion. There were those who sought his death. There were those who decided to silence the message by silencing the messenger. Like Joseph's brothers of old, they said among themselves: "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him...and we shall see what will become of his dream." (Gen. 37:19b-20)

Because Jesus would not abandon his calling, because Jesus would not forsake his mission, because Jesus would not desert the will and way of God, he entered Jerusalem knowing that it would be the beginning of the end. Jesus' faithfulness compelled him to enter Jerusalem and set in motion the final events that would lead to his crucifixion.

In the same way, we are called to the faithfulness of Jesus - even when it brings us into conflict with the powerful and privileged. We are called to be as faithful as Jesus was faithful, even when we knowingly face being unpopular, face danger, or face the uncomfortable moments and situations that discipleship inherently brings. We are called to ride into our own Jerusalem when faithfulness to God demands it.

And though we may not be able to see it, though it may confound us, though it may elude us - riding into Jerusalem rarely ends there. There's usually a little something more. But that's for next week.

Ride on - in faithfulness, in readiness, in complete commitment to God's will and way.

Ride on! For now and evermore. Amen.



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