

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

“Pomp...and Circumstances”

Sir Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1* is famous in the United States as our graduation ceremony march. When Elgar was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Music from Yale University on June 28, 1905, *Pomp and Circumstance* was played in his honor after the benediction before the guests left the hall. The complex emotions, triumphant with an underlying quality of nostalgia, suited the emotions of the day so well that the use of the piece soon caught on at other universities. Elgar’s tune captured the essence of a day when one stage of life ends and another begins. *March No. 1* was actually written as the first in a series of five marches that Elgar named *Pomp and Circumstance*. He took their title from a speech in Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *Othello*:

“Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!”¹

It’s pretty amazing that Elgar’s end of war or victory march was transformed into a graduation march here in the United States! We link the tune with a new stage in our lives as we graduate or celebrate a loved one’s graduation. *Pompe* meant “a sending” in Greek; *pompa* “a parade or procession” in Latin. Circumstance is defined first as “a condition that accompanies, determines, or modifies a fact or event.” Taken together the words have come to mean “a ceremonious accompaniment or display.”²

As Jesus approached Jerusalem the crowds believed this display meant he would be triumphant in a particular way. They were nostalgic for the days of the kingdom of David to return! They awaited a messiah who would come in power and might. The procession smelt of a triumph and fulfillment through power to those who knew the scriptures in the crowd.

During my first few months of work at Knoll in Washington, DC, a number of people were out sick all at once. One day I ended up answering the phones to cover someone’s lunch break. A woman called in asking for Cathy Fisher. “There’s no Cathy Fisher here in our office.” I replied. “Are you sure she isn’t someone at one of our factories?” “No. Last I knew she was in your showroom.” “Well, what did she do?” I asked. “She sold leather.” The woman replied. “Hmm. Cathy Fisher? Well I don’t know her but a woman named Catherine Pelletier is our current leather rep. Do you want to talk

to her?” “Go ahead,” she said. “Transfer me to her.” Later that day I found out that Cathy Fisher and Catherine Pelletier were one and the same. Only now she used her full given first name and had adopted her husband’s last name after years of marriage. I found the shift in Catherine’s name confusing. It threw my sense of understanding within our small office out of order. And she was still working the same job as prior years.

During the procession toward Jerusalem, we can hear some of the people’s beliefs about Jesus through the names and phrases they shouted. The people shout, “Hosanna!” This title implores him, “save now.” Overturn the powers that be with might and force, bring change, for you are our salvation. They also shout, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” The Davidic return of the king is supposed to be one of power and military might. Here sits Jesus on a donkey, which is also scriptural! But it is not a mighty horse or a horse drawn chariot. Jesus wields no swords to overthrow a government or to fight a holy war. Yet the crowd throws down cloaks and leafy branches to honor him, as they would do for a military procession. And Jesus lets them. It must have been nourishing to him to witness the crowd admit their need for salvation and restoration from the One who comes in the name of God—even if they had him pegged wrong.

Jesus, the One who is sent, knows before the procession that he will not fulfill the expectations of those who greet him on the road. He was sent to fulfill the scriptures, but at the same time he breaks dramatically away from well-known interpretations of the Messiah’s return. The disciples have just been told for the third time about Jesus’ necessary death and resurrection. I’ve always imagined them walking close to the donkey in a bit of a somber and protective mood while the crowd cries out and cheers. Yet his closest disciples, who have been told the way he will fulfill the scriptures, will also desert him as he waits the week out. Some of the other gospel writers tell us that the authorities were afraid, right there at the parade, of the trouble Jesus could stir up within the crowds. By the end of the week the crowds are easily led to condemn Jesus. *Pomp and Circumstance* is a fitting tune for this procession as one stage of Jesus life ends and he waits for his passion to begin. Jesus came to deal with the circumstances at hand, our condition of sin, which threatens to determine the events of our lives toward death instead of new life and reconciliation.

We reenact this parade each year with our own understanding of Jesus’ person and work. One different from the crowd’s understanding that day. Unlike the crowds we know where the parade and the journey to Jerusalem lands Jesus. We know it was our need for reconciliation with God and one another lead Jesus to this last leg of his journey beyond the gates of Jerusalem to the cross.

The entry into Jerusalem is a pivotal point in Mark’s gospel. Jesus still teaches, but mostly he is waiting. There are no more healings are recorded—for a new way of life and healing will come as Jesus lets the world do what we will with him.

Henri Nouwen tells a story about friend who was dying. “He was a man about fifty-three years old who had lived a very active, useful, faithful, creative life. Actually, he was a social activist who had cared deeply for people. When he was fifty he found out he had cancer, and the cancer became more and more severe. When I came to him, he said to me, “Henri, here I am lying in this bed, and I don’t even know how to think about being sick. My whole way of thinking about myself is in terms of action, in terms of doing things for people. My life is valuable because I’ve been able to do many things for

many people. And suddenly, here I am, passive, and I can't do anything anymore....help me to think about this situation in a new way. Help me to think about my not being able to do anything anymore so I won't be driven to despair. Help me to understand what it means that now all sorts of people are doing things to me over which I have no control."

Nouwen writes that waiting is "a passion" of sorts. Like Nouwen's friend, after Jesus entered Jerusalem, much of his time was spent waiting. The crowds' cheers only last a day. When he got off the donkey and entered Jerusalem he began waiting for the other shoe to fall. One stage of his life has ended, and another began as he went to the temple, looked around, and departed to the hills with the twelve. That week his teachings stirred up controversy, and he waited. The feelings of the crowds changed as Jesus proved to be a serious challenge to not only the authorities, but also to the people. The twelve ran out on him when the going got tough. He waited alone. The thing about following someone who humbly rides a donkey in a parade—is that nobody wants to be on standby to scoop the poop. It seems there are few who can see God's glory in this new way of reconciliation. This stage of Jesus' life challenges assumptions about the way God works in the world. Jesus' passion, desire, obedience and ability to wait out the week through its end answers the crowd's cry "save us." But no one understood it as such back then.

Nouwen and his friend talked a lot about passion and waiting as his friend lay in the hospital dying. "Could he see that in his being acted upon by the hospital staff he was already being prepared for a deeper love? Could he taste the new life in the midst of his passion?"³ They determined that the mystery of work, the mystery of love, the mystery of friendship, the mystery of community and the mystery of Jesus' love, all involved waiting—as Jesus did during Holy Week.

God's triumph is found as new life enters the mundane and even the horrific in our lives through the work and person of Jesus Christ. The palm processional must have provided Jesus with a glimpse of the best in humanity of what he was living and dying for as they showed their need for God's salvation. Saving grace for us Gentiles though comes as God lays down arms and lets humanity respond how humanity will to God's only Son, Jesus Christ. God marches to God's own "ceremonious accompaniment," a tune that takes a lifetime of transformation into new life for us to grasp as we strive to open our ears to hear its call more clearly. Yet God is at work fulfilling the crowd's cry, "save us" even when we don't fully understand God's ways, both then and now. Amen.

¹ <http://www.elgar.org/3pomp-a.htm>

² Random House Webster's College Dictionary (Random House: New York, 1998) 238.

³ Nouwen, Henri. "From Action to Passion" in *Bread and Wine: readings for Lent and Easter*. 175-184