

Micah 6:1-8
Mark 11:1-25

3 o'clock in the morning courage. 3 o'clock in the morning courage. That's what we see from Jesus in this entrance to Jerusalem. 3 o'clock in the morning courage is a description used in military circles to describe a leader who displays superior calm, focus and steadfastness under fire. The idea is that you can even wake such a soldier up at 3 o'clock in the morning, with catastrophic news and he will immediately come to acute and clear-headed assessment of the situation and what must be done next, and then carry it out. No panic, no casting about for what course of action to follow next, no hunkering down in a foxhole and holding his head in his hands waiting for the onslaught to pass by. Rather he will rally the troops to fight valiantly and effectively because he's not afraid of dying so much as failing his country and his comrades, his brothers in arms, his calling as a soldier.

3 o'clock in the morning courage. Jesus has it, we're going to need it if we're going to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with him. Palm Sunday's great for hymns like "All Glory, Laud and Honor" and "Hosanna Loud Hosanna". After forty days of Lent we're about ready for the tone to pick up, for the sun to peek out from the clouds if only for a Sunday. Enough with the ashes and self-denial, time for the green palm fronds and a few "at-a-boys"! And I'll tell you, if we just take the lectionary passage for today, Mark 11:1-11, we could get away with that understanding of Palm Sunday. But Jesus was never one for leaving well-enough alone. So I'm going to read what comes next, because I don't think you can understand Palm Sunday without knowing the rest of the story.

When Jesus went into the temple on Palm Sunday and looked around, he wasn't just coming as another pilgrim like the rest he had been passing on the road. He was sizing up the temple for what had to happen next. Viewing the battlefield before his attack. These actions were thoughtful, measured, deliberate, just like his preparation in choosing the colt. He chooses the colt to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy from Genesis 49:8-12, the Oracle of Judah.

Genesis 49:8-12

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey,

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my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

The description of the colt as one who has never been ridden is significant in the light the ancient provision that an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must be one that had not been put to ordinary use (cf. Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3; I Sam 6:7). Jesus knows exactly what he's doing, even if the people around him don't quite get it – even if the disciples don't even understand. Oh, we initially think that everyone gets who Jesus is, but that's what the part about the fig tree is about. See how it's described? From a distance it looks like it might have fruit because it's leafy. Notice leafy used anywhere else in our passage? Verse 8, they spread leafy branches on the road. The pilgrims honor Jesus crying out “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!” And what's the problem with that? That sounds good, that's from the Psalms and from the oracle I mentioned earlier in Genesis. Yes it looks good, but there's no fruit in their profession of faith, much as the fig tree that Jesus curses. They're saying “Hosanna” and reciting this traditional pilgrim's psalm as an at-a-boy. This becomes painfully clear if you take a look at a similar profession of faith that comes right before. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Blind Bartimaeus, the blind beggar from Jericho calls out to Jesus pleading for help, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Bartimaeus is asking for healing, he's asking Jesus to save him. “Come, save me, rescue me!” that's what the word Hosanna means by the way. Bartimaeus says it and means it, and Jesus restores his sight. So what does Bartimaeus do in response? “Followed him (Jesus) on the way.”

What do the pilgrims in chapter eleven do after shouting “Hosanna”?
Hmmm...funny it doesn't mention them in verse eleven, just Jesus and the

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twelve. Where were they by the time he makes his way to the temple? Where is this groundswell of support by the time he gets to the heart of the city? How come there's no mention of the Romans or the Sanhedrin coming out in force to meet him? They weren't around? They weren't aware? Doubtful, Pilate was known to plant soldiers within the crowds to mingle and put down any sign of insurrection immediately, often through quick assassination. You think he wasn't on his guard during the high holy days when Israelites remembered being delivered from their Egyptian oppressors? You think the Sanhedrin wasn't keeping track of Jesus' every move? They were, but neither of those groups saw Jesus as a significant threat on Palm Sunday, because the praise he received was ultimately as barren as the fig tree.

3 o'clock in the morning courage. Jesus cursing the fig tree, "May no one ever eat from you again." That takes guts. Because what he's talking about is the faith practiced by the people of Israel, particularly as it is manifested in the temple. Jesus isn't just saying that there are problems with Judaism that need to be ironed out, he's saying the religious establishment and its practices have to go care of our old friend Micah.

Micah 7:1-6

Woe is me! For I have become like one who, after the summer fruit has been gathered, after the vintage has been gleaned, finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger. The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of their sentinels, of their punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand. Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her

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*mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
your enemies are members of your own household.*

But they're not just words, Jesus sets right in to carrying out his attack.

Mark 11:13-19

Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' but you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

So the attack is successful. Jesus storms the temple and routs the Sanhedrin's forces, then retires from the field, and they can't do a thing about it. Why? "Because they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching." These the same folks that were crying "Hosanna" the day before? Then why are they so astonished at Jesus' teaching? Might be their "hosannas had more in common with at-a-boys than Bartimaeus' "have mercy on me."

But the disciples are starting to catch a clue, and they're worried.

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In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

Throw a mountain into the sea? Throw a mountain into the sea? He's lost his grip on reality! He wants to throw down the temple mount, and replace it with what? His own teaching from the mountaintop. Remember the beatitudes? Remember Jesus' teaching from the Mount of Olives, a mountain directly across from the temple mount, in Matthew 25 during this passion week?

Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you

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something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

There isn't any doubt about needs to be done. There isn't any doubt about what it's going to cost. The only unclear point in all this is how the disciples are going to answer the call, how we are going to answer the call. Cause not everybody has 3 o'clock in the morning courage. The crowds ultimately get past their astonishment with Jesus' teaching and end up crying "Crucify him! Crucify him!" The disciples, well you'll see how they lose their nerve and scatter. And us, are we prepared to walk humbly with the Lord, doing justice, loving kindness, walking into the teeth of enemy fire with Jesus? Are we prepared to follow orders, to go above and beyond the call of duty? Have we invested ourselves in the training and discipline necessary for such an undertaking? Have we surveyed the battlefield to understand best tactics? I'm talking about basic training: Scripture study, Sunday School, participation as church officers and teachers, fulfilling stewardship pledges, partaking in the sacraments, prayer, worship. I'm talking about missions: go out to attack injustice, poverty, pain and suffering while restoring the lives of the least and the lost, making the kingdom of God felt outside these church walls. I'm talking about finding an M.O.S. within the church,

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developing your spiritual gifts in concert with other members, and employing them for the work of the body of Christ. All with a spirit of humility and forgiveness. Never forget that when Jesus describes this great undertaking he punctuates the end, with the most incredible command of all, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Now, are we up for that? Then let’s cry Hosanna and mean it! Let’s ante up so that when we sing “ride on O Christ” we fall in behind and march with him. And he’ll give us that 3 in the morning courage, he’ll lead us through the ravages of Good Friday into the glory of Easter morning. “Ride on! Ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die; bow thy meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, thy power and reign.”