

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – March 25, 2018

[Mark 11:1-11 \(Palms\)](#) & [Mark 14-15 \(Passion\)](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions for Palm/Passion Sunday:

1. Palm/Passion Sunday is the transition point between Lent and Holy Week, making it a particularly fitting time to reflect upon one’s relationship with God. Where do you find yourself in these familiar stories? With which characters do you resonate? How does this story play out in your own life and faith? Are there points of significant dissonance or unsettling for you?
2. The contrast in moods between the two gospel readings today is hard to overstate. That contrast is often suppressed in our worship, with “Palm Sunday” taking center stage, and the passion narrative constrained to sparsely attended mid-week observances on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. What are your feelings and observations about these two contrasting moods as represented by our two gospel readings? Does one speak to you more than the other? Are both essential to Christian faith or can we follow our preferences and moods in our observance? Do we lose something when we move from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without “walking the road” through the darkness of Holy Week?
3. The Gospel of Mark highlights the importance of Christ’s sacrifice for the world. So what is it about the world that Christ was trying to transform with his actions? How do we see Jesus’ alternative way contrasting with the ways of the world in these gospel passages? Are the stories we remember here at the beginning of holy week central to the “good news” that Mark proclaims in his gospel, or more of an extended prelude to it?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Mark 11:1-11 – (From *Homiletics*; “Jerusalem March Madness” – March 25, 2018)

Palm Sunday may seem like an anomaly in the season of Lent. After a 40-day journey of austerity and sobriety, the jubilant cries of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem sound surprising to our ears. Interestingly enough, however, this celebration of Jesus is equally shocking in the gospel of Mark itself. Jesus' identity has been proclaimed secretly (cf. 1:24-25; 5:43) and in the open (cf. 5:19-20; 7:36-37) with an increasing emphasis on the paradoxical nature of the kingdom (e.g., 8:27-33; 10:27). It is clear that the disciples still do not understand Jesus' ministry as late as 10:35-40, as the sons of Zebedee ask about positions of power in the future. With the repetition of the predictions of what will happen when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem (e.g., suffering, rejection, death and resurrection), it is unclear whether his entrance in the city will be well received. The astonishing response of the crowd to Jesus' "kingly" action is muted by the realization that this is a king who is unlike those "among the Gentiles" (10:42). As the rest of the gospel of Mark shows, this king will reign in suffering.

Mark 11:1-11 is a fulcrum upon which the gospel of Mark pivots. Highlighting Jesus' identity and relationship to the coming kingdom of God and "our ancestor David" (v. 10), Mark points back to the beginning of the gospel, where Jesus is heralded as God's Son, the "Lord" (cf. 1:11; 1:3), and forward, to Jesus' death, where Jesus' sonship is again pronounced (15:39) and the reality of his lordship takes the shape of a Roman cross. In this sense, the story contains both flashbacks and foreshadowing, set between the conclusion of Jesus' ministry with his last miracle (the healing of blind Bartimaeus, 10:46-52) and the beginning of Jesus' journey to the cross. The transitional nature of Palm Sunday finds its roots in Scripture itself, as the story is full of paradoxes and promises.

As this is a transitional story, its geographical setting is particularly important. Jerusalem itself is the focus of Mark 11. While the city is mentioned 10 times in the gospel, four of those are in chapter 11 alone. Indeed, the trip to Jerusalem begins most explicitly in 10:32-33, as Jesus clearly connects the predictions about his passion to the journey he and his disciples, and the men and women who follow him (15:41) are making "up to Jerusalem." Of course, it is also clear in chapter 11 that part of the attraction of Jerusalem is the temple itself (vv. 11, 15, 27). Just as much as Jerusalem, though, the Mount of Olives is also a strong geographical and theological marker for the Second Evangelist. After verse 1, Mark mentions the Mount only twice more, in 13:3 and in 14:26. Chapter 13 has particular connections to chapter 11, as both are set on this mountain. In Mark 13, Jesus tells his disciples about the signs of the coming age. This is similar to chapter 11, as they herald the sign of the coming kingdom when Jesus rode into the city on the colt. Pointing to the future, to the eschaton, the Mount of Olives is a geographical marker that illuminates what is yet unseen as it pulls aside the veil to describe, even in cryptic terms, the signs of the age to come (13:3-37; cf. another mountain in 9:2).

Having set the scene, Mark narrates Jesus asking two of his disciples to find a specific colt in the village, because "the Lord needs it" (v. 3). The title of "Lord" is ambiguous, as it is used in the gospel to refer to either Jesus or God. The ambiguity may be intentional, of course, as Mark portrays Jesus as one who does the will of God (3:35; 14:36). Jesus needs the colt to enter Jerusalem, and from Mark's perspective, God "needs" the colt to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah. Furthermore, calling Jesus "Lord" makes connections to other messianic passages more clear (cf. 12:35-37; Psalm 110:1).

Part of the significance of this passage, especially at this fulcrum in the gospel narrative between Jesus' ministry and his passion, lies in proving the truthfulness of Jesus' words. If the disciples cannot trust the veracity of his teaching, then his ministry and their discipleship will be ineffective. When Jesus tells two disciples to find a specific colt, they discover it exactly as he told them. If Jesus' words come true in small ways, so they will also come true in larger ways (cf. 14:28 and 16:7). Emphasizing the parallels which we saw above between these two instances near the Mount of Olives (chapters 11 and 13), Jesus can be trusted in the long term (i.e., concerning the signs of the last days) because his words have proven true in the short term.

There is more at stake than just proving the veracity of Jesus' words, however. Mark seeks to highlight the parallels between Zechariah's prophecy and Jesus' words and actions. Unlike Matthew (cf. 21:4-5),

Mark does not explicitly quote Zechariah 9:9 which states, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (NRSV). Mark shows the fulfillment of this promise of God through his narrative. Jerusalem does shout at the reception of Jesus, who enters triumphantly, being heralded as king. At the same time, Jesus enters humbly on a colt. This paradox fits into Mark's context well, as Jesus has told his followers that "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant" (10:43). Discipleship in Mark is not about exerting authority over another (10:42), but it is rather about God's action in the lives of those who follow Jesus (10:27-31). The paradox of Jesus' triumphal entry and his humiliating death will be resolved by the promises of God who has brought the kingdom near (1:14-15).

As Jesus enters the city on the colt, the crowd cries, "Hosanna!" (11:9-10). This exclamation is a Hebrew and Aramaic phrase that means "Help!" or "Save us!" It is a cry that is familiar from the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118). Here, it is used as a cry of approbation, heralding Jesus as "the one who comes" (11:9). Mark has already emphasized how coming to Jerusalem is significant in itself; it is clear to the audience that passion predictions (cf. 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34) are about to be fulfilled, just as Jesus' words in this short passage predict the actions of the disciples and the bystanders. Nevertheless, "the one who comes" (11:9) is not an appellation that is limited to Jesus' coming to Jerusalem. Instead, the phrase is echoed twice more in the gospel when Jesus describes the future coming of the Son of Man (13:26; 14:62). Again, this passage evokes the imagery of the future in terms of Jesus' exaltation and return, even while emphasizing the humility and humiliation of his journey. The paradoxes of Palm Sunday continue.

The crowd also cries, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" (11:10). This exclamation is only in Mark, and seems to allude to traditions of Davidic messiahship that Mark has pointed to at key events in his narrative. For example, immediately before Mark narrates the entry into Jerusalem, the blind man whom Jesus healed, Bartimaeus, heralds Jesus as the "Son of David" (10:47-48). It is possible, however, that considering Jesus to be the Son of David without qualification looks back to the past too much, and does not account for the future of Jesus' exaltation and coming. For this reason, 12:35-37 may be correcting the understanding that the Messiah is David's son and therefore beneath him. By quoting Psalm 110:1, Jesus proclaims that the Davidic sonship of the Messiah must be interpreted through the lens of exaltation. This means that the crowd's hosannas and blessings herald not only the one who is the humble son of David, but also the one whom David has exalted as his Lord, who triumphantly proclaims the coming kingdom.

Such a triumphant procession, as we have seen, is just the beginning of the events of Jesus' passion. Verse 11 marks the transition to more sobering aspects of the story. Focusing on the temple, the central point of Jesus' activity in Jerusalem, Mark foreshadows the events of the next day: Jesus' actions in the temple proper, which likely accelerated the charges of his arrest. In the gospel of Mark, the paradox of Palm Sunday lies in the promise of what will come: a withered fig tree, overturned tables in the temple, a gospel that will be proclaimed to all nations, a trial, a cross and an empty tomb. Triumph and exaltation, humility and humiliation collide as God's kingdom comes near.

Commentary on Mark 14-15 – (From the *Homiletics* archive; "The Dirt on Da Vinci" – April 16, 2000)

The last major narrative section of the gospel of Mark recounts the plot to kill Jesus (14:1-2; 10-11), his anointing at Bethany (14:3-9), his final Passover with his disciples (14:12-42), his betrayal, arrest, and trial (14:43-15:15), and his crucifixion and burial (15:21-47). Each of these events, along with several less prominent events embedded within this framework, marks the outline of the passage from the earthly ministry of Jesus to the divine work of the saving Christ. The earliest of the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life, the gospel of Mark presents these events with few of the later layers of theological and liturgical accretions; the story of Jesus in Mark comes to us in as primitive a form as we have thus far been able to recover.

The final events in Jesus' life are organized around the preeminent Jewish festival of redemption and release, the Passover (14:1). At the level of Mark's narrative, Passover serves as the ostensible reason for the secrecy of the plot to destroy Jesus; a public trial and condemnation would incite the gathered crowds to violence (v. 2). At the symbolic level, the theological message of the Passover celebration - redemption from bondage and release to a new life with God (Exodus 12:1-13:16) - is both precursor of and fitting symbol for the work of redemption about to commence in the sacrifice of Jesus. The aptness of the correlation was recognized already by the writer of the gospel, who made the symbolism explicit in the last supper (14:12-25).

The "chief priests and the scribes" (v. 1), along with the elders (senior lay leaders of the community), formed the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious council in Jewish Palestine at the time of Jesus. Although its composition, powers and even number are variously presented in the sources that refer to it, the Sanhedrin clearly represented the interests of the leading citizens in Jerusalem in matters both civil and religious. That civil and religious interests could not profitably be separated during this period is reflected in the nature and discussion of the events surrounding Jesus' life and death. While the functions of the "chief priests" and "scribes" could be roughly divided along sacerdotal lines, for the purposes of the evangelists, they are united in their opposition to Jesus' message and activities. Their plot to undermine his ministry was long-standing in Mark (see 3:6; 11:18; 12:12), and a prominent theme in all the gospels.

Simon "the leper" (v. 3), Jesus' host at Bethany, is otherwise unknown in the gospels (see Matthew 26:6). As in the Hebrew Bible, the disease traditionally designated "leprosy" in the NT probably included a range of disfiguring conditions of the skin and joints, all of which would have rendered the sufferer ritually unclean (and, to the ancient mind, physically dangerous; see Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995], 311-16). As genuine victims of physical suffering as well as social fear and ostracism, lepers became powerful, though infrequent, NT symbols for the fearless and inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry (see, for example, Matthew 8:3 and parallels). Like other marginalized members of Jesus' society, such as prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor and the disabled, lepers received the good news of the kingdom of God - and its bearer - gladly, in obvious contrast to the smug indifference or overt hostility of the socially, economically, and religiously secure.

The anointing of Jesus by the woman of Bethany, unnamed here and in Luke 7 (but identified in the gospel of John at 11:2 and 12:3 as Mary, the sister of Lazarus), continues the well-known Marcan theme of the uncomprehending disciples (see also 5:31; 6:52; 9:32). Although the complainers are not explicitly identified as disciples (as in John's version, 12:4), the context clearly suggests that they are followers of Jesus who have missed an essential point of his teaching ministry, namely, the ability to perceive relative worth. The pious sentiments expressed by those concerned with the poor were no doubt genuine, but their narrowness of vision blinded them to the larger concern of the moment, i.e., Jesus' impending departure. The deeper meaning of the moment is a cornerstone of the gospel, which the unnamed woman perceives.

After Judas joins himself in betrayal to the chief priests (vv. 10-11), the next major episode in the narrative is Jesus' final Passover celebration with his disciples (vv. 12-25). The event begins with Jesus' instructions to two of his disciples concerning the preparations for the supper (vv. 12-16). Jesus' foreknowledge of the event echoes his earlier instructions on Palm Sunday (11:1-16). The guests at the last supper include, but are not limited to, the twelve (v. 20), one of whom, Jesus predicts (vv. 18-21), will betray him, "as it is written," a general reference to God's unfolding plan of salvation as contained in the Jewish scriptures. Jesus' designation of himself as "the Son of Man" (v. 21) is his customary but ambiguous self-reference in Mark's gospel (e.g., 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; etc.). In its various uses, it most likely refers to the full expression of Jesus' humanity, stressing now his earthly authority (as in 2:10), now his real sufferings (as in 8:31 and here), now his glorified exaltation (as in 14:62). The concept has a long and complex history in west Semitic religion (see J. A. Emerton, "The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 9 [1958], 225-42). The betrayer is not identified in this scene (as in John 13:26 and Matthew 26:25).

Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial (vv. 26-31) adds to the impression of the steady disintegration of Jesus' band of followers, a disintegration made explicit by a quotation from Zechariah 13:7. As Judas has already

fallen away, as Peter is predicted to fall away, so also will Peter, James and John fall away in sleep during Jesus' agonized prayer in Gethsemane (vv. 32-41); the theme of desertion reaches its climax in the next scene, when all the disciples flee (v. 50) before the mob comes to arrest Jesus. This theme takes a tragicomic turn in the mention of a "certain young man" who leaves his scant clothing behind in his haste to escape capture (vv. 51-52).

Jesus' ersatz trial before the entire Sanhedrin (vv. 53-65), historically an unlikely event on the first night of Passover, is probably a reflection of the earliest Christian communities' attempts to inculpate Jewish authorities in the death of Jesus and to minimize the involvement of the Roman overlords. Similarly, Mark's depiction of Pontius Pilate's conducting of Jesus' trial (15:1-15) is at odds both with the evangelist's depiction of the rabid hatred of the Jewish leaders (who persist in condemning Jesus before Pilate as well as before the Sanhedrin) and the historical record concerning Pilate's known behavior. Pontius Pilate, fifth Roman prefect of Judea (26-36), was removed from his post for excessive cruelty, and there is no evidence to support his depiction as an innocent bureaucrat caught between warring religious factions. That Jesus was crucified more on the grounds of imperial sedition rather than because of religious offenses is supported by the placard nailed to his cross identifying his crime (15:26): "The King of the Jews."

Jesus' crucifixion is recounted by Mark with brutal bluntness and no dwelling on the physical suffering (15:21-39). Although crucifixion was a Roman and not a Jewish punishment, Jesus' death is nonetheless understood as in perfect accord with God's plan of salvation as revealed in the OT; Psalm 22 is particularly prominent in the Marcan passion narrative (see especially v. 34, where Jesus' cry of dereliction quotes the opening words of the psalm). Although Mark says that Jesus was crucified at 9 a.m., subsequent church tradition has tended to observe the Johannine chronology (19:14), which places the crucifixion about noon. The symbolic centering of the crucifixion at the midpoint of the day reflects later theological (and, perhaps, liturgical) tradition which has not yet begun to color the primitive Marcan account.

The burial of Jesus is told as straightforwardly as his crucifixion (15:40-47). The historicity of the prominent role played by Mary Magdalene in the circle of Jesus' followers is suggested by the fact that Mark presents her as being the only witness to Jesus' death (15:40), burial (15:47) and resurrection (16:1). The important roles played by women followers of Jesus was, of course, one of the several points of contention between his movement and the orthodoxy of his opponents. The placing of Jesus' body in a borrowed tomb (vv. 43-46) brings to completion the earthly story of the itinerant Galilean miracle-worker and prophet who, preaching a message of renunciation and sacrifice, had "nowhere to lay his head."

Additional Resources

- **"The Text this Week"** – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
 - a. [Liturgy of the Palms](#)
 - b. [Liturgy of the Passion](#)
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.