

“Then He Entered Jerusalem...”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 • Mark 11:1-11 • John 12:12-16 • Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 31:9-16 • Philippians 2:5-11

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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Palm Sunday

So it begins. “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!” It begins. Soon, it will end.

Palm Sunday, when we remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, marks a pivotal moment in the church calendar. The season of Lent continues, but now we are in its final days. We call it “Holy Week,” because of the momentous events that we remember during this all-important week. It begins here, on Palm Sunday. It continues on Maundy Thursday, when we gather with Jesus and his friends in an upper room as they celebrate the Passover meal. It continues on Good Friday, when we travel the Way of Suffering with our Savior as he is led to his death. It continues on Holy Saturday, when we quietly wait with his mourning followers as they observe the Sabbath. It culminates on Easter morn. I say this every year, and I’m going to keep saying it: don’t just jump straight from the celebration that is Palm Sunday to the celebration that is Easter without, in some way, observing the events in between. Easter is *meaningless* without the somberness of Maundy Thursday and the pain of Good Friday.

All four of the Gospels tell this story, each in their own way. We’re mostly following Mark’s Gospel this year. Jesus enters Jerusalem, on a donkey, surrounded by a cheering crowd spreading palm branches and coats on the road before him, in chapter 11. He spends some time teaching in and around the temple in chapters 12 and 13. In chapter 14 he is anointed, he celebrates the Passover, he prays, he is betrayed, arrested, abandoned, and put on trial. In chapter 15 he is tried again, he is mocked, he is publicly executed, and his body is buried. And in chapter 16 ... well, let’s save that for next week.

As we read these accounts, we hear some names. Jerusalem. Bethphage. Bethany. The Mount of Olives. Gethsemane. Judas Iscariot. Pontius Pilate. Golgotha. Real people. Real places. These Gospel narratives are not works of fiction. They tell of *momentous* events that changed the world.

This is a picture of the heart of Jerusalem today, looking from the south. It is a very large city, sprawling in various directions as the topography allows. The metro area is home to about 1.2 million people, roughly comparable to the city of Dallas, or the Salt Lake City metro area. It is filled with neighborhoods, shops, hotels, malls, stadiums, universities, libraries, museums, historical sites, tourist attractions, and a very large array of synagogues, churches, and mosques. In the time of Jesus it was much smaller, probably fewer than 100,000 people, though it was still a very large and important city. It probably looked something like this; this is a scale model of the first-century city, in the Israel Museum.

Surrounding the Old City in the heart of Jerusalem is a very large wall. Those walls stretch two and a half miles around the Old City, averaging about 39 feet in height, and more than 8 feet thick. The

walls contain 34 watchtowers, and eight very large gates, one of which has been sealed shut for five hundred years. These are not the same walls that surrounded the city during Jesus' day – they have been destroyed and rebuilt several times since then – but they are similar. There was a wall back then, and gates, and watchtowers. There was also a palace, a fortress, a Roman theatre, a hippodrome (for horse racing), a reservoir, a drainage channel, and Jerusalem's most noteworthy feature, the massive temple complex, where every day Jewish priests carried out the sacrificial rituals that were prescribed in the Jewish law. Most of those structures had been built by Herod the Great, who was essentially a puppet king of local origin who served the Roman Empire. The palace in Jerusalem had been built by Herod for Herod, not long before Jesus was born. When Herod died, his kingdom was divided into three parts. One of Herod's sons governed the province of Judea – which contained Jerusalem – for about ten years, but then Emperor Augustus removed that son and put in a governor of his own choosing, a man named Coponius. You've probably never heard of him. Three more governors followed, all of them relatively unimportant. The fifth governor was named Pontius Pilate. Perhaps you've heard of him...?

During the ten years of his governorship, Pilate mostly ruled from the city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. When he came to Jerusalem he stayed in Herod's palace. Historical records outside the New Testament indicate that there was continual tension between Pilate and the Jewish people. Several times things nearly got violent. Once, Pilate brought imperial standards with the image of Caesar into Jerusalem, which led to a Jewish mob surrounding Pilate's house for five days; another time, Pilate depleted the funds that had been donated at the Jewish temple to build an aqueduct, which resulted in a mob of Jews surrounding Pilate on his next visit to Jerusalem. Pilate ordered the mob beaten, and many Jews died. But those incidents were not what made Pilate world-famous.

It probably happened in the year 30, four years after Pilate became governor. It was springtime. The Jews were about to observe their annual Passover celebration, commemorating their miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt more than a thousand years earlier. Jews from all over the Roman Empire were making their way to Jerusalem. The number of people in the city increased dramatically at Passover. The Roman presence also increased; Rome was constantly worried that their ongoing oppression of the Jews would one day result in a riot, or a full-scale rebellion. From their tall fortress in Jerusalem, strategically situated right next to the temple so they could keep an eye on it, the Roman military had a commanding view of the whole city. They must have seen him coming on that colt.

Jesus of Nazareth. An itinerant Jewish preacher, from the region of Galilee, a ways north of Jerusalem. Over the preceding two years he had gained quite a following, and also quite a reputation. Wherever he went, controversy followed. Was he a respected Jewish teacher? A healer? Or was he a fraud? That depended on who you asked. Some people *loved* him. Others *hated* him. Many Jewish leaders *feared* him, or felt *threatened* by him. Now he was coming to Jerusalem, on the cusp of Passover, surrounded by a large crowd, throwing cloaks and palm branches on the road before him, shouting "Hosanna!" – which means, "Save us." The Romans must have wondered what they hoped he would save them *from*. But more troubling to the Romans was the *other* thing the crowd was shouting: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" Was Jesus coming as a *king*? The long-expected *Messiah* of the Jews, a military commander who would come with force of arms and launch an all-out war against Rome, to reclaim Judea for the Jews? But Jesus did not come bearing a sword or a shield; he did not come with legions of armed men; he was not riding a horse fitted for battle. He came dressed in simple clothes, unarmed, surrounded not by strong armed men but rather by a gaggle of men and women, old

and young and in between, mostly (but not entirely) Jews. If this was the start of a revolution, it was a most *unusual* revolution – and one surely doomed to failure. The Romans perceived *no serious threat*.

He came over the Mount of Olives. If you're in Jerusalem, looking east toward the sunrise, there's a deep valley, and on the other side of the valley is a very substantial hill. There were villages on the hill; one called Bethphage, just over the summit; another called Bethany, on the far side. Jesus had friends who lived in Bethany, friends who provided him a safe place to stay during his time in Jerusalem. He came over the crest of that hill, he and his followers; they reached the summit, beholding Jerusalem in all its glory. Jesus descended the hill, on a borrowed donkey, hailed by his entourage, watched carefully by the religious leaders among the Jews, watched just as carefully by the Roman military. Would something happen? Something eventful? Something momentous? Something *violent*?

No. Not yet. The tensions are building, but they haven't exploded yet. Jesus comes into Jerusalem, he goes into the temple, he looks around, he probably prays, and ... *nothing happens*. Not that day. He leaves the city, back the way he had come, up and over the Mount of Olives, back to Bethany. He comes again the next day, and the next. The Gospels don't tell us how many days passed between his so-called "triumphal entry" and the celebration of Passover. It probably wasn't many.

The tensions keep building. Not with the Romans. Jesus's dispute isn't with *them*. His dispute is with the Jewish religious leaders, with the way they are practicing their religion, and the way they are teaching it to the common people. He causes quite a disturbance in the temple on his second day in the city, chasing out the moneychangers who were fleecing the poor people who were coming to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. Another day in the temple, the chief priests, scribes, and elders demand to know how he has the *authority* to do the things he is doing. The Pharisees and Sadducees – two sub-groups within Judaism – try to trap him in his words, as does a group of prominent Jews who support the Roman overlords. They all fail. Jesus outwits all of them with his wise words. They keep trying to find *something* they can pin against him, some *charge* they might be able to use against him. But there's nothing. This man may be frustrating and annoying, but he's *clean*. He's *impeccably* clean.

It could have kept going on like that. The Romans rightly perceived that this man posed no threat to their power and rule. Despite the prophecies, he was not acting like a man who wanted to start a revolution. And the Jewish leaders – try as they might – couldn't find a way to silence him. He was smart, and savvy, and *very* well-versed in the Jewish law. He knew how to play their games.

The pivotal moment wouldn't come about because of something the Romans would do, and it wouldn't come about because of something the Jewish leaders would do. It would come about because of a decision made by *one man*. One man who would become as famous as Pontius Pilate. One man who *thought* he was making a good decision, one man who *thought* he was acting on his own. One follower of Jesus who, for a time, became a servant of the forces of darkness. One man who, though he probably never knew it, was actually helping to bring about *the will of God*. His name was Judas, and he was one of Jesus's closest associates, one of his twelve hand-picked disciples. He was the one who would set into motion the sequence of events that would bring heartache and pain to many people, including himself; the sequence of events that would *ultimately* bring about the redemption of the world.

Welcome to Holy Week. Welcome to the final days of Jesus' ministry on earth. It begins ... *now*.

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