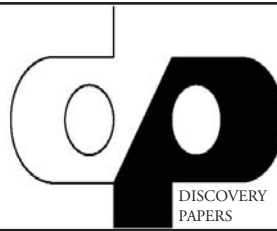


BRINGING CHRIST TO THE WORLD

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 11:1-11
33rd Message
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I don't consider myself to be much of a one-on-one evangelist. On the rare occasions that I manage to work the gospel into conversations, I rarely feel that I make any headway. Some years ago, a woman began attending our young adults group when she felt, simply, that she wanted to start going to church. I made a point of meeting with Ginny every six months to reach out to her, explain the gospel to her, and answer her questions. I felt that I was confusing her more than anything else.

Many folks, I fathom, feel much as I do. As followers of Jesus, they believe in sharing the gospel with others, but they stumble when it comes to doing so. When Jesus was preparing to enter Jerusalem, he helped his disciples present him to their world. Might he also help us present him to our world? It's a new year; perhaps the Lord will make a new way.

Beginning with Mark 11, we step into the final act of Mark's three-act drama. The region of Galilee and the road to Jerusalem formed the backdrops of acts one and two, respectively. Act Three, which covers Mark 11:1-16:8, unfolds in and around Jerusalem. Whereas Jesus stayed on the move in acts one and two, traveling from village to village and then journeying southward, in Act Three he stays put in Jerusalem and its environs to face his enemies. The way of the Lord leads Jesus to this city, "the joy of the whole earth" (Psalm 48:2).

A donkey for the Messiah

Mark 11:1-6:

As they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' you say, 'The Lord has need of it'; and immediately he will send it back here." They went away and found a colt tied at the door, outside in the street; and they untied it. Some of the bystanders were saying to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission.¹

After making the journey from Galilee to the region of Judea, and after making the final 3,800-foot climb from Jericho to the Mount of Olives, Jesus and his disciples, along with a crowd of pilgrims, approach their destination: Jerusalem. The disciples are hoping that Jerusalem will enthrone Jesus as the Messiah, the ultimate king of

Israel. Jesus, however, has predicted that he will suffer and be killed in Jerusalem.² Two conflicting visions of the kingdom of God, that of Jesus and that of his disciples, are about to collide.

As Jesus prepares for his entry into Jerusalem, multiple streams of the biblical story, from Genesis to Malachi, are converging. Mark's narrative crackles with anticipation. Jesus' journey, from the hills of Nazareth to the Mount of Olives, nears its climax.

The Mount of Olives, featured in Mark's account, played a part in the hopes of Israel (Zechariah 14:4). Jesus' procurement of a "colt," a word that can be applied to either a donkey or a young horse, echoes King David's procurement of a mule, or donkey, for his son Solomon, who was assuming the throne (1 Kings 1:33, 38). Jesus' insistence on the use of a donkey that had never been ridden echoes instructions for the return to Israel of the ark of the covenant, which represented the royal presence of God. A "new cart," pulled by two cows on which there had never been a yoke, carried the ark (2 Samuel 6:3).³ Jesus' instructions regarding the donkey also mine the Messianic expectations that Genesis 49:10-11 fostered: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, / Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet ... / He ties his foal to the vine, / And his donkey's colt to the choice vine." Jesus, of course, hails from the tribe Judah. Furthermore, the procurement of a donkey was considered the prerogative of the king (1 Samuel 8:16).

Mark is not concerned with whether Jesus supernaturally envisioned the location and posture of the colt or made prior arrangements for its procurement. What comes across in his reportage is the Messianic authority with which Jesus acted. Jesus instructs two disciples to procure a donkey in a nearby village, and they obey. He envisions possible resistance in the village and instructs the disciples how to respond. If a question is raised about the procurement of the donkey, then the disciples should literally say, "The Lord of it has need"—that is, God has need of it. As the Messiah, Jesus represents God and speaks with his authority. The donkey will be put in the service of the Messiah, God's anointed king. The disciples find the donkey in the location and posture predicted by Jesus, and they overcome the suspicions of some villagers by following Jesus' instructions—developments that signify Messianic authority.

Following instructions

Jesus called his disciples to present him to their world. Likewise, he calls us, as his church, to present him to our

world. Although most of us agree that we should do so, many of us stumble when it comes to practicing what we believe. Understanding how Jesus relates to his disciples can help us put what we believe into practice.

First, if we're honest, many of us would admit that we don't really want to present Christ to our world, for a whole host of reasons. It's important to note, however, that before Jesus called his disciples to do anything, he called them to be with him (Mark 3:14). He did not tell them to be fishers of men; he said he would make them become fishers of men (Mark 1:17). Likewise, he calls us first to be with him: to share life and love with him. If we accept his invitation to share life and love with him, he will share his heart with us. What he calls us to do, then, emerges from relationship with him. Cultivating a relationship with him helps us trust him, confront our apathy and fears, and sense his direction. Watch, especially, for when the streams of your own story converge. Perhaps your story, from birth to the present, crackles with anticipation.

For the disciples to present Jesus to the crowd, they needed to follow his instructions, even if they seemed a little strange, and trust that his authority could overcome resistance. One of our reasons for not presenting Jesus to people in our world is that we fear that they will reject Jesus and possibly us along with him. This story, though, inspires us to listen to Jesus; follow his instructions, even if they seem a little odd; and trust in his authority. If God has need of something—a donkey, money, resources—he is after all Lord of everything. God loosens colts and opens doors in the interest of his Son, even enlisting would-be opponents who protest the requisition of donkeys and keep doors shut.

As I have met with the Lord and studied the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of Mark, my heart has increasingly inclined toward the church's mission to the world. Cultivating a relationship with the Lord has helped me confront apathy and fear. A few years ago, I sensed that the Lord was speaking to me as I was reading John 21. As told in that chapter, the disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing. In the morning, Jesus told them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. They did so and caught so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. For the disciples, in John 21 as in Mark 11, it was simply a matter of following Jesus' instructions. The fishing stories in the gospels are about something more than fishing; they're about participating in the mission of God. As I read John 21, the story burned in my heart. I sensed that the Lord would be asking me to cast my net on the other side of the boat, so to speak.

As I continued to meet with the Lord and study the Scriptures, he continued to shape me. Unplanned events pointed in a direction, and ideas began to coalesce. The streams of my own story are converging, and an approach has emerged. Now, a few of us in our church are laying the groundwork to present Christ to our world in a new way. I have envisioned reasons why this new approach wouldn't work, which has caused me to trust in the Lord's authority, not my abilities. More on this approach later.

The two disciples, having procured the colt, prepare it for Jesus.

The triumphal approach

Mark 11:7-11:

They brought the colt to Jesus and put their coats on it; and He sat on it. And many spread their coats in the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. Those who went in front and those who followed were shouting:

“Hosanna!

BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD;

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David;

Hosanna in the highest!”

Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.

Why does God need the donkey? The reason becomes clear in verses 7-11. Jesus, the Messiah, plans to ride it for his two-mile approach, down the western slope of the Mount of Olives, to Jerusalem. Why a donkey? Because Israel, based on Zechariah 9:9, would recognize the Messianic overtones of such an approach:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem.

Behold, your king is coming to you;

He is just and endowed with salvation,

Humble, and mounted on a donkey,

Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Jesus chooses to approach Jerusalem in humility, on a donkey. The two disciples who procured the colt provide for Jesus a makeshift saddle with their coats. Perhaps they learned from Bartimaeus, the blind beggar of Jericho, who jumped up and left his cloak to come to Jesus (Mark 10:50). Many in the crowd of pilgrims respond by spreading coats on the ground, creating an honorific carpet. Similarly, servants placed garments on the steps before King Jehu (2 Kings 9:13). Others in the crowd spread leafy branches on the ground. Even creation seems to be bowing down before Jesus.

As Jesus rides toward Jerusalem, the pilgrims surround him and hail his approach with shouts of praise based on Psalm 118:26, a verse from a psalm that pilgrims regularly sang on their way to Jerusalem. Their words not only hail Jesus as coming in the name of the Lord, with the authority of God, but also as bringing with him “the kingdom of our father David.”⁴ Earlier, the crowd heard Bartimaeus appeal to Jesus as the Son of David, a Messianic title. (The Messiah was expected to be a descendant of David.) Now, the entire crowd, some of whom had earlier attempted to quiet

Bartimaeus, hails Jesus as the Messiah as he approaches Jerusalem, the city of David (Mark 10:47-48).

Similarly, 200 years earlier, the Jews had waved palm branches and sung hymns after one of their leaders, Judas Maccabeus, defeated a pagan ruler, reclaimed Jerusalem, and cleansed the temple of pagan influence. (The story is told in 2 Maccabees 10:1-9.) Some 700 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah predicted that worshipers would come to Jerusalem with “joyful shouting” along the “Highway of Holiness” (Isaiah 35:8, 10). Now, here comes a crowd of worshipers to Jerusalem shouting the praises of Jesus.

The pilgrims, recognizing the Messianic symbolism in Jesus’ approach, respond in kind. Jesus and his chosen means of approach have awakened their dreams for a better world. They throw caution to the wind, hailing Jesus as the Messiah as he moves toward a showdown with his enemies.

Expectations are sky high as Jesus, enthroned on the praises of the pilgrims, enters the city of the great King. Jesus carries with him the hopes of the world as he enters Jerusalem, the joy of the whole earth. His arrival, however, is a giant letdown. When dignitaries visited Jerusalem, officials welcomed them and honored them by escorting them to the temple. No one welcomes Jesus, however, and he visits the temple without escort. Jerusalem snubs its king with a silent slap in the face. Jesus looks around and leaves. The climax is an anticlimax. The hour, Mark says, is late. Yes, it’s late in the day, so Jesus, like many visitors to Jerusalem during the Passover, departs to lodge in one of the surrounding villages. But the hour is late in a symbolic way as well, both for Jesus and Jerusalem.

The departure of Jesus from the temple echoes the departure of the glory of the Lord from the temple in a vision of the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel’s vision, the glory of the Lord left Jerusalem and “stood over the mountain which is east of the city,” namely the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:22-24). Because Israel had forsaken the Lord, the Lord forsook his temple, enabling Babylon to destroy it in 586 B.C. Likewise, Jesus departs to the east and stays in Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. Less than 40 years later, in 70 A.D., the rebuilt temple was destroyed by Rome.

The words of the prophet Malachi, from the last book of the Old Testament, haunt this scene: “And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears. For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap” (Malachi 3:1-2).

Dreams of a better world

The disciples, following Jesus’ instructions, presented him in a way that awakened the dreams of the crowd for a better world. Most people throughout history have dreamed of a better world. The people in our world are no different. God has implanted the Messianic Dream in

every culture. Even if people in our world don’t know how to respond to a man riding down a hill on a donkey, they still tend to attach their dreams to an individual—or, more likely, to an individual they hope will come along.

In 2009, for the first time in 47 years, the number of Americans who said they had had a religious or mystical experience, defined as a “moment of sudden religious insight or awakening,” was greater than those who said they had not, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Despite the so-called secularization of the United States, there remains in our country a strong spiritual impulse. People may be more ready for the gospel than we think.

Jesus gave an approach to his disciples that resonated with the people in their world. Are there approaches he would give us that resonate with the people of our world so that we might expose them to him and that at least some of them would rejoice and shout in triumph because their king is coming to them to overthrow evil and create a better world?

Two disciples used their coats to make a saddle for Jesus. Consider putting what you have at the disposal of Jesus. Use your resources—your money, your dwelling, your job, your ideas, your abilities, your spiritual gifts—to enthrone Jesus. Don’t hold on to your coat, so to speak; the Lord has need of it. During my tenure as pastor of the young adults group at our church, many couples in our church opened their homes for Bible studies and parties. One brother, whenever I thanked him for hosting the young adults, would regularly tell me, “Hey, it’s the Lord’s house.” The folks who hosted the young adults enthroned Jesus with their homes.

Jesus took a humble mount, which means that he came not to be served but to serve, to defeat evil and create a better world by giving his life. He leads by putting the needs of others—the needs of the world—before the needs of himself. Unlike the rulers of the world, he speaks the truth—boldly, without pulling punches—but doesn’t manipulate or coerce. He invites men and women to submit to his redemptive rule. By and large, our world is not familiar with this picture of Jesus. Nor is it familiar, by and large, with a picture of Jesus’ followers as servants of the world. We must come to our world, as our Lord did, not to be served but to serve, to give our lives for the sake of the world.

Furthermore, when you prepare the mount for Jesus, you might have to confront something else: the temptation to jump on the donkey yourself so that the crowd might validate you. Validation comes from God, not the crowd. Therefore, get the mount ready for Jesus, get out of the way, and feel God’s pleasure as you celebrate the enthronement of his Son.

A group of disciples, not just one man, participated in procuring the donkey and presenting Jesus to the crowd. When thinking and praying about presenting Christ to your world, don’t do so by yourself. Powerful forces oppose

the gospel in our world; therefore, we need each other so that we might together present Christ. Participate in a community that presents Christ to the world.

A community of Jesus' followers presented him as the Messiah, and a crowd joined it to celebrate Jesus. Ours is a culture that values the individual. Because of this, we have gained much: we are more or less free to do whatever we want. But we have also lost much: we don't know how to live in community anymore. Many people in our world therefore hunger to know and be known as part of a mutually supportive community. After attending our church for the first time, a family friend approached me afterward with a big smile on her face. Her first comments to me concerned not the worship service per se. She simply said, "What a wonderful community!" We have something that our world doesn't have: the Holy Spirit, who dwells among us and makes us members of one another.

The disciples didn't twist anyone's arm. They didn't talk anyone into following Jesus. As a matter of fact, they didn't talk at all. They just prepared a mount for Jesus and celebrated him. The sight of Jesus, humble and mounted on a donkey, generated a spontaneous celebration. As a community, present Jesus, celebrate him, and let people react to him. He's the attraction.

The disciples, and then the crowd of followers, risked their lives to hail Jesus as the Messiah. Usually, we don't risk our lives when we present Jesus to our world; we risk our reputations. Some, maybe most, like the leaders in Jerusalem, will reject Jesus and think less of us. So what? Jesus is worth it, and God will take care of your reputation. Throw caution to the wind.

A new approach

How might we awaken dreams for a better world, expose the Silicon Valley to the living Jesus, come together to present Christ, address the hunger for community, and let our world see Jesus as we celebrate him? The approach that a few of us in our church have begun to take is to do all of this in the context of small groups.

Generally, small groups in churches are designed to meet the needs of the members of those churches. What if, on the other hand, we modeled our small groups after the small group that Jesus led? Jesus gathered twelve men not only that they might be with him, in relationship, but also that he might send them out in mission to the world (Mark 3:14-15). In 1 Corinthians 14, the church—essentially, a small group that met in a home—is seen as a participatory community that attracts seekers and skeptics. The new small groups that we are starting in our church combine Mark 3 and 1 Corinthians 14. They are relational, and they are relational in a participatory way. They are also missional, and they are missional in an invitational way.

In the new small groups that we have begun to plant, we relate to the Lord, sharing life together, including joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, prayers and struggles. We

seek to nurture authentic communities that pulsate with the life of Jesus and extend beyond the regular gatherings. We also encourage members of each group to prayerfully invite seekers and skeptics they know to join their groups so that they might experience the life of Christ as it is expressed in his people. We don't focus so much on "sharing the gospel"; we focus on living the gospel and inviting others to be part of us. As a result, many people, we hope, will say, in so many words, "God is surely among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25).

The stuff that dreams are made of

Ginny, the woman I tried to share the gospel with, continued to attend our church, and many people in our community befriended her. When Ginny joined a group of us that was traveling to Belize for a short-term missions trip, she had been immersed in our church for three years, but she still hadn't made a commitment to Christ. One evening at our camp in Belize, I watched Ginny walking with Ed, a team member. Wistfully, I turned to a friend and said, "I hope Ginny comes to know the Lord." Shortly thereafter, I went to bed. In a dream, I heard that a terrorist was planning an attack in a shopping center. I knew that Ginny was staying in an upstairs apartment behind the shopping center. I sprinted to the apartment, ran upstairs, and yelled "Ginny! Ginny! Ginny!" I grabbed her by the hand, and we ran down the stairs to safety. Then I woke up. In the morning, Ginny approached me with a curious smile on her face. "Would you baptize me today?" she asked. She told me that she had prayed the previous night in the presence of Ed to give her life to Christ.

Later that afternoon, Ginny stood in the cool waters of Jaguar Creek. Flanked by Ed and me, she announced to the group that she had given her life to Christ and that she wanted to be baptized. Baptism symbolizes death and resurrection—death to one way of life and entry into another. She told us how the love of the church community had changed her life. After her profession, Ed and I let Ginny fall gently backwards into the creek, and the water engulfed her. Then we pulled her out of the water—just as I, in my dream, had pulled her out of her apartment the previous night.

Yanking Ginny out of a dangerous situation one day, albeit in a dream, and pulling her out of water that symbolizes death the next—a coincidence? Perhaps not. I think God gave me a picture of what our church did for Ginny.

For three years she had been surrounded by new friends who loved her. They had offered up countless prayers on her behalf. God used those friends, that love, and those prayers to lead Ginny to a new way of life—an eternal way. The people who loved Ginny were given the privilege of taking her by the hand and escorting her into the kingdom of God.

Let's do more of that.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A They approached Jerusalem (1a)

B Jesus made arrangements to procure colt (1b-2)

C Reason for procurement of colt: "The Lord has need of it" (3-6)

B' They brought colt; Jesus sat on it (7)

C' Reason for procurement of colt: Royal approach of Jesus (8-10)

A' Jesus entered Jerusalem, left for Bethany with the twelve (11)

² When Mark reports that Jesus enlists two disciples to procure for him a colt, which he eventually sits on, we might call to mind the request of James and John, two disciples, who asked that they might sit next to him when he comes in his kingdom (Mark 10:37).

³ Jesus also came from a womb no man had touched and was placed in a tomb in which no man had been laid (Matthew 1:18, John 19:41).

⁴ The word "hosanna," originally used to appeal to God for salvation, came to be used to express exuberant praise to God.

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