

# *Marching on Jerusalem*

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Mark 11: 1-11

## I.

A traveling teacher and faith healer from the edges of the Holy Land showed up outside Jerusalem, one day, with a small group of his companions. An unlikely figure rode into Jerusalem, the great city, that day, as the gathering crowd threw down their cloaks for an impromptu red carpet, and cut branches to cover the ground as well.... The crowd began to shout Hosanna, and hail him as "The One who comes in the name of the Lord".

For a moment, the crowds at least recognized who this was, and they greeted the messiah with joy. It was a good moment, but a brief one. You didn't have to be a prophet to see it coming! It was the way the empire dealt with upstarts, the way things worked in a tense and occupied land. It was the price of stability, the price of the Peace of Rome: sometimes the troublemakers had to die.

It's no accident that Jesus entered Jerusalem the way he did...it was the fulfillment of Zechariah's ancient words, about a king like David coming in peace, to end all the war. A scholar named Ched Myers has pointed out\* that Jesus entering Jerusalem with branches waving was staging a public demonstration. Jesus was confronting the powers that be in the very center of power-- at least the local center of power. And the way they marched in made fun of the way that the Romans staged their victory parades.

Jesus' March on Jerusalem got the attention of the authorities. It made them nervous: who is this would-be king from Galilee, this son of a handy man making a royal entrance into the city of David? And making fun of the occupying authorities is bad policy.

## II.

Some years ago, I watched a remarkable movie set in the Civil War, about the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, African American enlisted men. The movie was entitled *Glory*. It was based largely on historical facts. The black soldiers had white officers appointed over them. They were equipped poorly, not properly paid, not even given proper boots at first. Nonetheless they persisted, giving their lives in the cause of freedom. Such soldiers in the Civil War knew that if they were captured they would be killed, just because they were black. About a third of the Massachusetts 54th gave their lives in one pointless battle, a charge to seize a fort that they approached but were unable to hold. They refused to go back, preferring to die instead.

War is not a glorious thing: it is about suffering and violence and contested power. Those men, a century and a half ago, were people who knew they were marching to almost certain death in the cause of a country that wouldn't even pay them fairly: it staggers the mind. Theirs must have been one of those moments of decision that goes beyond the glory. Theirs was a kind of extravagant generosity, a valor that goes beyond romantic ideas of bravery and courage. It was a kind of divinely foolish thing.

Each and every one of us comes to a time at least once and probably more often in our lives when God calls us to do something foolish and courageous, to break into some arena we aren't familiar with, to act or speak aloud and at risk, for the sake of love or justice. There comes a time when there is something that we each need to do. Not the same thing! A particular thing to which you are called, or I am called. We don't always know long in advance what it will be. It may seem small in the eyes of our neighbors! It may seem terribly wasteful or terribly ineffective in the eyes of the people who want to think they are in charge. But when the time comes, we know what it is and when we need to do it. If we are afraid, so be it, if we are unsure so be it, if we get criticized, so be it. But we need to get on with it, walk into the city with all the faith and hope and love at our disposal. What is our place in the Palm Sunday parade?

### III.

Another march, just two years ago: this one I took part, a march not on the gates of Jerusalem but rather the North Carolina legislature, as part of what came to be known as the “Moral Monday Movement.” In the elections of 2012, a new coalition of political leaders had swept into the North Carolina legislature, and a new governor had come into office. To some of us it seemed the progress of fifty years was being rolled back. In the first weeks of 2013, everything from Unemployment benefits to Gay rights had come under attack. In particular, a new Voter ID law had been put into place, threatening access to the polls for poor folk, elderly and college students. In North Carolina, there is some history around voting rights issues—memories are still fresh of days when black folk were

subjected to literacy tests to intimidate and discourage voting. Now these hard won civil rights were on the line again...

The Reverend William Barber, state president of the NAACP put out the call. And every Monday, starting in about March, a demonstration was held outside the halls of the legislature. And every Monday, more and more citizens, women and men, gay and straight, black and white and Latino, gathered in the state capital of Raleigh, paraded singing into the legislature's rotunda, held prayer, sang hymns, and were arrested.

My turn came in early June, on a Monday, the day before my 55<sup>th</sup> birthday, when Rev. Barber had to be out of town—he sent out the call for ministers now, and it became clear to me that it was time. It was a soggy day, raining hard, and I was glad to get in out of the rain into the rotunda with a hundred or so others, leaving several thousand supporters on the outside waiting. I will never forget the procession through the doors, up the steps and into that rotunda. After a brief period we were given five minutes to leave or be arrested. An unlikely band of gay marriage activists, women trying to preserve funding for clinics, school teachers, poor people, some seminary professors and pastors gathered there, waiting. As we waited we continued to pray.

It isn't easy to watch others put in cuffs and led away and wait your turn. The woman next to me was a social worker, being arrested for the first time. At one point she went quite pale, looked like she was going to pass out, confessed she felt "not so good." But she shook that off, stood on her own two feet, waited. My eye was caught by a young black man— a fellow Baptist preacher—as he was instructed to place his hands behind his back. On his face was a look of acute

pain—not physical pain. Spiritual pain. And I realized that I had no idea what this experience was like for him.

We were led off and sat for hours with our hands cuffed tightly in plastic behind our backs. Eventually they cut the plastic off, we were placed in a transport bus, then taken to a processing center, where we sat for a few more hours. Nothing moved quickly. I found myself next to the young black preacher, whom I had met once before. We talked awhile. I learned why he looked so pained. He had been a police officer, who felt called to go to seminary. He was married to a police officer as well. For him as a law enforcement officer to do this law-breaking, however nonviolent, was to seal the fact he would never again be an officer. In fact, he and his wife were both concerned it might cost her her job, or at least cause trouble.

In that moment, I felt glad to be there, because for me, with a supportive congregation and a well-established career, the risk was slight—maybe a little jail time, a fine, or community service, but no life shattering consequences. But I was privileged to stand with people who had spent a lifetime avoiding this kind of trouble, and to sit and talk with a young black officer and preacher who had made an extravagant gift. We knew we had little chance of changing anything in state politics or the direction of the world. But at least we had spoken out, prayed aloud for our leaders, and made clear where we stood. And we had walked together briefly in irons, and crossed some lines together that all too rarely get crossed.

#### IV.

As we approach Easter of 2015, we remember. We remember an unlikely parade into the halls of power so long, so long ago. I find strange comfort in Jesus'

march on Jerusalem, a failed march if ever there seemed to be one. Or was it? Or was it.

I find comfort in that march so long ago I find comfort and yet I am humbled. I find myself asking, have you and I done what was in our power for the sake of Christ? Have we waved a few palms or laid our clothes in the road yet? Have we risked a little something for the sake of peace? Have we spoken out of turn, for the sake of truth? Have we done what we could?

Most of us are not called often to march. We are more likely invited in *our* journey of resistance and hope to share some brunch, or confront a hard situation in the workplace, be a good parent or offer a hand of healing. But whatever our unique calling, may each of us be so moved by the spirit of the living God, that we find ourselves some time some place with that flask of ointment, or with that burning conscience, or with that heart full of love. And when we feel like what we have to offer isn't enough, or is ineffective or foolish, may we hear the echoes of the voice of Jesus, catch a glimpse of the eyes of Jesus. It is a procession we begin anew every Palm Sunday. It is made of all the small steps we take in the name of hope. It is our lives being broken open in the name of justice and love.

^ Amen.

\*See in particular Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man*, a compelling analysis of Mark's Gospel