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Riverside Covenant Church
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Mark 11:1-11 – Not What We Bargained For

The men at Riverside have been studying the book of Mark in our bible study this year and we have walked through the life and ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. While Jesus began his ministry with healings and broad calls for people to repent and follow him, in the chapters right before our passage this morning, Jesus has begun to ramp up his language. He has talked about the sacrifices that the disciples must make to truly be his disciples. He is also talking about what is ultimately going to happen to him. In Mark 10:33-34, Jesus tells his disciples, "**We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."**

And so here we are. At the beginning of chapter 11, Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. He said they were going there and they did. Jerusalem was the center of everything. It is where all the action was. If one were to stage a revolution, this is where it would happen.

But right before they get to Jerusalem, Jesus sends his disciples to get a horse for him to ride on. Up to this point it seems that Jesus has walked everywhere. He walked from city to city teaching and performing miracles, but now as he enters the holy city of Jerusalem he decides to ride on a horse.

There is a new image of a royal Jesus that emerges. He is riding into the city of power to make something happen. You can imagine the excitement that his disciples and followers must have felt, for hundreds of years they had hoped and waiting for the Messiah, the one who would come to conquer on their behalf. The disciples have already been jockeying for a piece of Jesus' glorious power. **In Mark 10, James and John** go up to Jesus and ask if they can sit on his right and left sides in his glory. Everyone had expectations of who Jesus was and what he was going to do. And everyone, even the disciples who were presumably amongst the most faithful had a dog in the fight.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem like a king on a horse that had never been ridden before. (If you want proof of Jesus' divinity, look at the fact that he was able to ride a horse that had never been ridden before without being thrown off.)

The disciples put their cloaks on the horses' back as a saddle and as Jesus enters Jerusalem many were throwing their cloaks onto the ground and waiving braches in the air. As they were doing this they were shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

What a celebration. **It was like a celebration parade. When I was in Junior High**, my baseball team advanced to state in the playoffs and when we returned home we rode through town on a fire truck and I remember everyone waving and honking their horns in celebration. Jesus is arriving with great fanfare and jubilation.

And this morning our kids ran through the sanctuary waving streamers and singing and celebrating. I grew up in a church that passed out palm branches as you entered the church and we would hold them up and say "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" during the worship service. And then we would take the palms home and braid them together or hang them up somewhere in our house and then we would replace them again the following year.

All of us like to imagine that we are a part of the crowds that were gathered as Jesus entered Jerusalem. And we like to hope that we would have been one of those people hooting and hollering, excited that Jesus had come.

But Palm Sunday is a confusing one, especially when we take into account what will happen in just a few days and then in one week from today. Riverside is going to have a service on Thursday called a Maundy Thursday service. This service is very different from our service today. No one will be celebrating anything. In fact, it is a dark service because it remembers Jesus' death. Many of these same people who are rejoicing and proclaiming their jubilation at Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem will be standing by the cross with a sense of satisfaction in a few days.

So what went wrong? Their expectations were not met.

We all have expectations about how things will go. And we cling to those expectations and despair when they don't happen as we wanted. Maybe you had expected for Purdue to be in the Final Four. Perhaps you had hoped that your son would love to play baseball. Maybe you had dreamed that your daughter would be a politician. Perhaps you expected that you would have a dream life by now.

Whatever it is, **we all have expectations about how things will turn out.** And expectations are powerful. **When I played football in high school,** my football coach was very big on creating visual images in our minds about what would happen in the football game later that evening. We were to picture ourselves making tackles or catching passes . . . and scoring touchdowns and winning the game. We were to expect that these things would happen.

All those people that lined the streets as Jesus entered Jerusalem had expectations of what was to happen in the coming days. **A Jewish revolution was about to begin.** And they were picturing themselves no longer being treated harshly by the Romans, ruling Jerusalem and having everything that they needed. They pictured themselves overcoming every hardship that they had ever faced and defeating their enemies. They expected that as Jesus descended upon Jerusalem that he was going to take over and finally make them the rulers of the establishment.

You can imagine their expectations. Particularly people dreaming about what this meant for their children . . . what this meant for their financial security and for their safety . . . they were rejoicing because they expected that in the coming days as the Jesus revolution began, everything would be better.

And they yelled this word, "Hosanna!" But what were they yelling?

It is not a word that we often use. In verse 9, our passage says, **“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”** This is a quote from Psalm 118: 24-25, **“This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success.”**

Hosanna literally means, **“help” or “save us”** and became a shout of praise towards one believed to be able to do this. In Hosanna there is an interesting tension between the desperate plea and the overwhelming jubilation. An awareness of a deep need still unmet, but an overwhelming hope in what you have just encountered.

Do you ever feel that way when you think of Jesus on the cross? In the church I grew up in there was a crucifix, Jesus on the cross, that hung in the center of the sanctuary above the altar. There was no way to be in that church and not notice it. And I can remember as a kid just staring at it and thinking that everyone tells me that the cross is a good thing, but it does not look so good to me. It looks awful.

This word that the crowds are exclaiming wrestles with the tension they are experiencing. With joyful exuberance they are yelling towards Jesus, “help,” “save us.”

I recently read of a pastor that was meeting with a group of seventh graders to answer questions that they wanted to pose to their pastor. The most popular questions had to do with salvation . . . and so the pastor told them that before he would answer their questions he had a question for them. **“Since salvation implies that you are being saved from something, what do you think Jesus is saving you from?”** The first answer that came back was “hell.” And the pastor explains that there is nothing wrong with that answer, and it is indeed true, but it is too easy. It is one of those **perfect Sunday school answers** that you give the pastor . . . like Jesus being the answer to every question. Why are you here, Jesus. Who is your best friend, Jesus. How do you know what you are supposed to do, Jesus. Those are the answers you are supposed to give when a pastor asks a question.

The pastor does not just let the students get away with saying that they are being saved from hell. It is more complicated. He pulls out our passage here in Mark 11 and asks the students to read it. It is clear in

our passage that the crowds lining the streets and cheering were not primarily thinking about beings saved from hell. If we had to guess, **they were thinking about being saved from the Romans.** They wanted freedom from political oppression.

The pastor decides to ask his question another way to the 7th graders. He says, **“let me put it this way, if God was on the ball, what would God save you from?”** And he said the conversation finally got a little interesting. One kid raised her hand and said, “death.” One kid said that God could save him from his math test. Someone said “pressure.” Another said, “my parents’ expectations.” Another kid, quietly said “fears.”

And the pastor said that they were finally getting somewhere.

Ask yourself that question . . . **if God were paying attention to your life, if God cared deeply about you . . . what would God save you from?** Ponder that question, what would God save you from?

Would God save you from depression? Would God save you from cancer? Would God save you from anger . . . from addiction . . . from debt . . . Would God save you from complacency . . . save you from divorce . . . save you from loneliness . . . from hate . . . from doubt . . . from worry . . . from pride . . . What do you want God to save you from? Hell is on the list, no doubt, but what gets your blood pumping to think of being freed from? What hope would get you excited enough to jump out of your seat and run to the streets, waving your arms in the air and screaming “Hosanna?”

Part of our issue with finding the church and God and Jesus irrelevant to our daily lives is that we don’t bring our real stuff to God. We are content with the Sunday school answers . . . so church becomes the land of Jesus, and the bible, and smiles and hugs, and no drinking and no smoking, and nicer clothes and being a good person and heaven and hell . . . but away from church is the land or “real life” where we have jobs and bills, and sadness and anger, and frustration and lots and lots of problems. And when we hear that Jesus saves . . . we think way down the road we will get something . . . but we don’t imagine God has anything for us right now. That is a mistake.

But here is the kicker. The Jews that were celebrating on the streets of Jerusalem wanted to be saved from Roman captivity. I have had friends that I wanted saved from cancer. I have wanted God to save my parents' marriage. And none of those things have gone the way I wished.

And isn't that the story we hear in the next couple of days. These same people that stood on the street praising Jesus, waiving their palms in the air, screaming "save us" with hopes of a better and more glorious future because of Jesus . . . find themselves screaming angrily, "crucify him, crucify him." Oh, how the tides turn when what we want, what we expect does not come to pass.

The people of Jesus' day wanted rescuing, but they wanted rescuing in their own way.

Does this mean that our God does not save? Now we can make this really simple and say, "of course not, it just means that our God does not save us from life stuff, but from hell or from our sin." And it is indeed true that God saves us from sin, but does that mean that in all the other circumstances of life that we struggle with that God is absent? That he cares about us going to heaven, but not about our friends with cancer. Or that he cares about us going to heaven, but not about our lack of work? Or that we doesn't want us to go to hell, but he is o.k. if we are depressed?

I don't think so. What does it mean, then, for us to be saved by God. When faced with difficulty or grief or confusion, I often turn to Psalm 23, "¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

I particularly like verse 4. **“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”**

If you remember when Jesus is born he is called Emmanuel, which means **“God with us.”**

Our yearning is for heaven, there is no doubt. We want everything to be perfect and rightfully so. We want all our burdens and hurt to be gone. And they will be when we are with God forever. But right here, right now, how does God save us. He saves us by being with us.

When I was a kid I was at an air show with my family at an airport out in the middle of nowhere. It was a beautiful day with the sun shining and we were just sitting outside on launch chairs in a field watching the planes and parachuters. About mid-afternoon the weather changed drastically. Extremely quickly a storm moved in on top of us and a couple tornados could be seen in the distance. They canceled the air

show and people began scrambling. Our cars were parked off site so we had to catch a bus to the parking lots, but the since everyone was running towards the buses it was crazy. I can remember running as fast as I could holding my aunt's hand running towards the busses only to find that they were all full. And so we turned around and just scrambled for some shelter. I was crying and huffing and puffing as I could see my family was frantic. We ran to the hanger of the airport, but it was entirely glass and not exactly a safe place. The basement was full. I rushed over under an overhang and as I looked around my aunt was gone. I was horrified, scared, alone, freezing and wet. I was a pitiful site and screaming at the top of my lungs for my family. And then out of the corner of my eye I saw her running towards me and she grabbed me and we huddled under the overhang, she wrapped me in her coat and arms and that is all I remember. That was it. I remember nothing else.

That is what I think about when I think of what it means to be “saved.” The storm was not gone, it was still pretty scary, but I was not alone. I can't promise that your cancer will be gone or that you will find a job tomorrow, but I can promise that you are not alone. And that is not insignificant thing.

longer are we alone in our journey, but God is with us.

The entire life of Jesus is a journey. His ministry is a journey. He gathers 12 disciples and they go from place to place teaching about God and the need to come and follow Jesus. But it is all leading towards this final week in Jesus' life. It begins as Jesus enters Jerusalem with excitement and jubilation. But it ends with his death on a cross . . . and thankfully his resurrection from the dead.

I want to invite you to go on this journey too in your own lives. To allow yourselves this morning to dream and think and celebrate what it would mean for you to be saved or rescued from whatever it is that is ailing you right now. Not to see it all disappear necessarily, but to be relieved from the burden of it. To be set free from what you heart feels or worries about.

And then I want you to think about what it means that the God who created you came down onto earth and started piling your burdens upon himself. He is taking your hurt and your pain, your grief and your

confusion, your questions and your doubts, you hopelessness and your loneliness . . . and your sin, your mistakes and those things that you knew you should have never done, but did them anyway. He is taking all that on his back and he is walking with them and as he is walking you are throwing more and more of your junk onto him.

And later this week he will die with it all. He is going to take it to the grave with him. I encourage you to come this Thursday and remember this moment with us. The service is at 6:30 and we will have childcare for 2 year olds and younger. But this will be a time when we remember this moment. The moment that Jesus died for us, with us, on our behalf.

One of my favorite hymns is "O, What a Friend We Have in Jesus". Listen to the lyrics.

What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge;
take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield thee;
thou wilt find a solace there.

When I was growing up I mentioned that we used to always get palms for Palm Sunday and keep them all year. Well the following year we used to bring our old palms to the church and they would be burnt and used for ashes on Ash Wednesday. This is the cycle of our Christian walks. We hope and cry out to God in praise. We die to our expectations and rejoice that God is with us.

Psalm 40:1-3, “¹ I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.

² He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.

³ He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear
and put their trust in the LORD.

May we cry out to God “save us.” And may it truly be a cry of praise.

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