

Rev. Dr. Todd Grant Yonkman, Transitional Senior Minister  
First Congregational Church of Granby  
Sermon for Palm Sunday  
28 March 2021  
Text: Mark 11:1-11

## Ride On King Jesus

Lights flashing and horn blowing, the town of Milbridge fire engine led the bus full of victorious 11 and 12 year old girls back to their school. They had just won the regional basketball championship. In the tiny fishing village of Milbridge, Maine, basketball is the only winter sport. There is no high school in town, so the elementary school is the home team. My oldest daughter's first experience of playing competitive sports was for the Milbridge Tigers. Her grandfather, a lobster fisherman, showed his support by showing up at the games with a photo of Fiona taped to his fishing hat. For my daughter and likely for most of her teammates, this was one of the few or perhaps the only time in their lives when they would ever have that experience of being lifted up by an entire community. For a lot of these kids who won't go to college. That's a moment in their life that they will always have. These are the people who are forgotten when the tourists leave: it was the volunteer firemen who were also fishermen and the half-time police officer. That team was their pride and joy. Fishermen's daughters. Clam digger daughters. Migrant worker daughters. It was a humble victory for the Milbridge Tigers and the fire truck parade was their victory pageant.

Palm Sunday is a victory pageant for underdog, the out-of-luck, the overlooked. As a pageant, it's meant to be acted out because it means something more when we embody it than when we just talk about it. The songs need to be sung. The branches need to be waved. The pageant needs to be performed for something to shift inside us. It's how we connect to our ancestors in faith: the countless women and men, unnamed women and men who faithfully lifted up the least, who have humbly remembered the forgotten

with great joy in their hearts knowing that Jesus has gone on before us. The one who gave his life for us, who walked willingly into the jaws of death, who courageously faced the worst the powerful of this world have to offer was raised to life as a sign of hope for all of us who long for a world of justice and peace.

The Palm Sunday story is full of symbolism that the people of the time would have picked up on immediately. The donkey, for example, refers to the Prophet Zechariah, who centuries before wrote, "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." By going into the detail of Jesus sending two disciples ahead to procure the donkey Mark is making it clear that Jesus carefully staged this bit of street theater. Zechariah is a piece of Scripture that provides a script for Jesus and the people to follow. It puts Jesus' actions in a wider context of God's promise to free Jerusalem from oppression and bring peace to its inhabitants. It's easy to imagine that many people were excited about Jesus. He had gained fame as a healer and teacher and miracle worker. But Scripture that Jesus used as a script give his actions a bigger meaning. Jesus isn't just some guy. He's the guy God promised through the prophet Zechariah centuries before. He's the one. This is it. Shout your Hosannas. Wave your branches. It was the ancient version of the fire truck and car parade. Honk the horns and flash the lights. Our victory is at hand.

But then something unexpected happened. Their champion was defeated. He didn't even put up a fight. One of his own betrayed him, and his closest followers abandoned him. Jesus was tried and condemned and executed as a traitor. Perhaps Jesus wasn't the one the crowds had been

waiting for. From the human perspective Jesus looked like just another pretender, who, when the chips were down, couldn't deliver the victory they were waiting for. What they didn't understand was that Jesus was fighting for an entirely different kind of victory. Jesus was engaged in a spiritual battle against sin and death and hopelessness and fear. His vision was not to win the game but to invite all of humanity into a different game altogether--a game in which the first are last and the last first and all are invited to enter the kingdom like a little child would--with wonder, joy, and trust. Jesus followed the Zechariah script for a little bit. He rode the donkey. The crowds rejoiced. Then he flipped it and the crowds turned on him. What they didn't anticipate was the surprise ending: resurrection.

This Palm Sunday I invite us to join with the crowds in welcoming Jesus. I invite us to follow the script. I invite us to once again fulfill Scripture. I invite us to take to heart the African American Spiritual we began our worship with: "Ride on, King Jesus, no man can hinder me!" Jesus' victory is our victory, but it's a different kind of victory. It's not a victory that creates winners and losers. It's a victory of love and inclusion over hatred and division. Depending on where you look these days, hatred and division can seem to have the upper hand. When I think of the recent mass shootings in Georgia and Colorado, I just don't know what to say anymore. The status quo is unacceptable. The cost in human life, the ripples of trauma that each shooting sends into our communities is just too high. I've preached. I've prayed. I've written. I've spoken out in protest. Nothing seems to move the needle. This is just one incredibly violent and painful way we seem to be stuck as a country. Stuck as communities. Stuck as Christians. Where's your promised peace, King Jesus? When will we learn to beat our spears into pruning hooks and our swords into plowshares? I cry out and I hear Jesus

say, "Follow the script. Follow the way of love and sacrifice I've laid out for you. With my death and resurrection I've cleared the way. It's up to you to walk the path."

I love "Ride on King Jesus." I love that feeling of the march down deep in my bones. It's the march of love that I want to be a part of. For folks on the margins, people of color, the poor, the disabled, folks suffering addiction, depression, this is your march. I think about the consolidation project that First Church and South Church are working on here in Granby and imagine that we will have plenty of opportunities to ride with Jesus in the love parade. To me it means that we will avoid decision processes that create winners and losers. We will seek consensus. When there is difference and diversity of opinion, which is inevitable, we will listen deeply and with respect. We will approach problems not to push personal agendas but to discover creative solutions. It's my experience that when we follow the humble way of service as best we can, we will discover that miraculous outcomes are in store. Some of the same girls who celebrated that victory went on to lead their high school to the class D state championship. That team was coached for the first time in its history by a woman, who also happened to be a local lobster fisherman with no college degree. We don't know exactly what the final results of our efforts will be, but we know what they will feel like: resurrection.