



First United Church of Oak Park

What the Power of God Looks Like

Mark 11: 1-11

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By the time Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the people were anxious for a savior. Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, along with countless thousands of others of the faithful. But the faithful and the devout were not the only ones in Jerusalem. Days before, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had come marching into Jerusalem atop a glorious warhorse at the head of a vast multitude, an army. Pilate had traveled from the seat of Roman power, the walled and garrison city of Caesarea on the sea. And following behind him were legions of Roman soldiers, armor flashing, war banners waving, the cadence of martial songs keeping time as they marched straight through the gates of the holy city and into the Temple, garrisoning on the Temple Mount. This is what power looks like, what power on display looks like.

Later, Jesus arrives in the holy city, too. Jesus, who was the talk of the whole nation, Jesus, who people were saying was the king of the Jews, who was going to restore the throne of King David, that great warrior king. And as Jesus came down from the Mount of Olives, from far off the people of Jerusalem could see that he, too, was mounted and riding at the head of a vast multitude. The people were shot through with an electric thrill — perhaps Jesus was going to conquer these Romans, storm the city and put the Roman army to flight. They did everything they could to show they were ready to join, but it was all so last minute. They didn't have a huge carpet to roll out, so they spread their cloaks on the road; they didn't have any military banners to wave, so they cut down branches to wave. And as Jesus approached, they were shouting, "Save us! Save us! Save us! Blessed is the one who will restore the throne of David!" That's what the word hosanna means — it means "save us," or perhaps "save us now!" They shouted "save us" as Jesus and his multitude approached the city.

But as he came closer, they could see first that Jesus wore no flashing armor — he didn't even have a weapon. Jesus rode no warhorse, it was a donkey, some farm animal without even a saddle, just some grubby cloaks to cushion its bony

back. And this multitude that followed? It was no army, no legion of fighting men. There were many wrapped in lepers' rags, fishermen, laborers, farmers, the infirm; there were many women among these disciples. They made their way in shabby glory down to the Temple, the Temple where the Roman army was garrisoned. The Roman guard didn't even bother to try to repel this mass of people — it was clear they were no threat. This? This was the king of the Jews? This is who everyone was talking about restoring the throne of David? Caesar's reign would remain secure.

Imagine a strong fighting force? This was the opposite of that. Some conquering entrance? This was the opposite of that. This was NOT what power looks like, NOT what power on display was supposed to be. The Romans had been ready for war. And the crowds too seemed ready for war. The power of violence and war is easy to see, easy to understand; it can march in brazen martial cadences, and no one would mistake it for anything else.

But Jesus chose a different kind of power, led with the power of God. And the power of God does not look like power at all. Because Jesus chose a path that valued life over violence, because he counted the lives of the weak as of equal worth as those of the strong, he made protecting the vulnerable more important than allowing the strong to showcase their strength.

It was not the deliverance that people had imagined when they shouted, "Save us, save us!" The power that Jesus brought was not like the power lorded over them by Rome. But countless thousands lived, who otherwise would have died, had Jesus been a devotee of war and strength.

This story has landed differently with my soul this year. Quite differently. This year, I understand why the people of Jerusalem went out and shouted, "Save us! Save us now!" I understand the desire for a grand conqueror to come and sweep away trouble, put enemies to flight. In December and January, the pandemic had spiraled beyond any semblance of control, and our democracy, too, had spiraled unrecognizably out of control. Had Jesus chosen mid-January to return to the world in the flesh, I would have rushed out and been among the first to shout — "Save us! Save us now! Deliver us, sweep away the enemies, sweep away the virus with some irresistible power or force."

But that is not what God is like. Even when God was walking the earth, that is not what God was like. Christ's power is a simple thing, a quiet and peaceful thing that does not look like power at all. Christ's power looks like placing the health of my neighbor as of equal importance to my own. Christ's power looks like making

the protection of the vulnerable more important than allowing the strong to showcase their strength. Christ's power looks like placing the weak at the head of the line, the last first, the first last. Christ's power doesn't look like power at all. And the multitude that follow that after Jesus Christ: They are no army. The grand procession of those who imitate Christ are deliverers in unlikely garb: At the head of Christ's army is a woman in a homemade mask pushing a grocery cart full of food for an elderly neighbor; behind her is a man loading a pallet of mac and cheese through the basement window of our church parking lot for the food pantry; behind him is a column of nurses in scrubs and sneakers with good arch support; behind the nurses come a legion of teachers bleary-eyed from too many hours on Zoom; and there are grocery baggers, and pizza delivery guys, and a legion of artists making art to fill up our nights. And Christ at the head of them in shabby glory marches through the heart of this trying year wielding something that looks nothing like power.

Christ's power, the same today as on that day in Jerusalem: It doesn't look like power at all. But untold thousands, untold hundreds of thousands owe their lives to those following that simple way of peace. What we know is that of 500,000-plus people have died from this terrible plague. But what is impossible to know is how many lives were saved by the multitude of those who did what was right. I am alive today, have made it this far through this terrible plague, not because I alone have been so careful but because others have been careful, too. I owe my life to the simple, peaceful, right actions of others. Someone else gave up seeing their family, and so I am alive. Someone else gave up travel and vacations, and so I am alive. It is impossible to know exactly who to thank for my life and health; it could be anyone, it could be you. That is what the power of Christ is like. It is hard to believe, but it is the greatest power there is, quietly and mysteriously saving unknown, unknowable lives. In the shabby glory of simple things, Christ still marches through the world. May we have the joy of following after him. Amen.