

“Costly Kingdom”
Mark 11:1-11
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Palm/Passion Sunday
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Every candidate for high office needs a drama, and Jesus is as dramatic as they come.

Like any other king he rides into town to the acclaim of crowds, throwing their cloaks on the ground to honor him, crying, “blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.”

Like any other king he connects his power to the most well-loved politicians of the past – “blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.” Like any other king he connects his rule to the blessings of God.

Like any other king, the procession follows the route that all successful, conquering kings take, from the Mount of Olives, headed toward the temple. Every candidate for high office needs a drama, and Jesus knows how to arrange one.

Yet it’s not clear from this drama whether Jesus really wants to be king or not. Unlike rebel leaders of the past, this insurgent carries no weapons, and neither do his followers. Unlike previous military leaders, he does not ride on a stallion, dressed in armor. With no sword and no shield, there can be no battle like the one between God and the enemies of Israel predicted by the prophets.¹ Jesus rides into town on a borrowed colt. The security forces in Jerusalem must have been confused. Is he making fun of the king, or trying to be one? You can almost hear them on their walkie talkies – “we’ve got an unarmed rabbi, riding solo on a little colt through a crowd. what do you want us to do?” They must have been confused. And I don’t think they were the only ones.

The disciples must have been perplexed, too.

Are you the Messiah, the one come to claim the throne, or not?

Do you intend to claim the throne or just make fun of it?

Do you intend to do take power or just ridicule it? It’s not clear what Jesus is doing. And I bet none of the parties involved like that ambiguity. The powers that be need to know what exactly Jesus is doing. The disciples of Jesus need to know exactly what Jesus is doing. We need to know exactly what Jesus is doing.

Because there are consequences for enacting this drama and there are consequences for those who follow him. But Jesus doesn’t make it clear. He doesn’t explain what he’s doing to anyone.

And while I can understand why he would want to keep the authorities in the dark, it’s hard to appreciate his withholding from his disciples. They are his closest followers and his closest friends. They are the ones who have stuck by him through thick and through thin. They are the ones who have promised to follow him. It’s hard to build a following when you keep your

¹ See Zechariah 14:24 for the Mountain of Olives as the location for the apocalyptic battle against the enemies of Israel. Also, 1 Mc 13:51 for the triumphant procession of the rebel leader Simon Maccabaeus. In addition, Josephus notes the insurgent fighter Manahem who return as a king to rally support for his siege.

main supporters in the dark. It's hard to build a following when you keep your followers guessing about your strategy, guessing about your thoughts, guessing about what's going to happen next. The disciples need to know what Jesus is doing and it seems to me that he owes them as much.

Maybe he kept them in the dark because had they known, they wouldn't have allowed him to this. Waltzing into Jerusalem, lampooning the powers that be, acting out sedition whether for show or for real – no follower of Jesus would have allowed him to do this. Nobody followed Jesus because they wanted to take unnecessary risks. Nobody followed him because they wanted to watch him suffer. Nobody followed him because they wanted him to die.

People followed Jesus because he transformed the lives of living people.

Those excluded from community because of illness or disease, he brought back in.

Children pushed away by adults he welcomed.

Hungry people he fed.

Those excluded because of race or religion he included.

They followed Jesus because of the community that he created, the healing that he wrought, the welcome that he extended.

They followed Jesus because he awakened a spiritual hunger that often dies in the institution of religion.

They did not choose to follow him because they wanted to watch him put himself at risk.

They did not choose to follow him because they wanted to see him to stir up danger with no reasonable purpose.

They did not choose to follow him because they wanted to see him die on a cross.

It's no wonder Jesus keeps them in the dark. It's no wonder they don't get to advise him on his strategy. It's no wonder they don't get to argue with him over whether the parade is a good idea. It's no wonder they don't get a chance to change his mind or change direction. Because the disciples would not choose this as the way. It comes with too high of a cost.

No clear-thinking follower of Jesus would choose this way. Because the way of Jesus should not come with this kind of a price-tag. It should not come with this kind of a cost.

There should not be a cost to the way that transforms the lives of people.

There should not be a cost to creating and nurturing an inclusive community of faith.

There should not be a cost to welcoming children.

There should not be a cost to feeding hungry people.

There should not be a cost to healing fissures of race or religion.

There should not be a cost to healing, to wholeness, or to peace. The way of Jesus ought to be established because it is God's choice, good and right for the world, and why should God's choice, why should what is good and right for the world, why should healing, and wholeness, and love, and peace always lead to conflicts with powers that oppose them? Why should choosing God's way cost us anything?

I don't think Jesus ever answers that question. We get a lot of stories in the Bible about human nature, but I don't think Jesus ever really answers the question. He doesn't ever say why

the healing and wholeness and love and peace have to cost something. But there is no question that it does.

Jesus offers the world his kind of kingship. A kingship whose ruler washes the feet of the people he serves. A kingship whose ruler prioritizes those made most vulnerable in our world.

A kingship whose ruler doesn't act anything like most of the rulers we have come to know. He offers his reign without any coercion, without any threat of force.

He rides into the city offering himself - healing and wholeness and love and peace. The people shout their acclamation as if they, too, want these things. He gives himself freely and the powers that be reject what he has to offer.

And I don't know why we reject it. I don't know why our world charges something from people who choose what is right and good. I don't know why following in Jesus' path cost us something. But I have no doubt that it does.

I'm quite certain that the world seldom chooses nonviolence.

The world rarely chooses to give away healing for free.

The world does not often choose community over selfish gain.

The world rarely chooses neighborliness, or generosity, or love. The world charges something from anyone who chooses what God has ordained as good. It will cost you something. Something that many of Jesus' followers are not often willing to pay.

I want a world of sharing, but I'm not willing to give away all that I have.
I want a world of nonviolence, but I'll only go so far in making myself vulnerable for peace.
I want a world of neighborliness, but all too often I won't put myself at risk with any strangers.
I want to be part of community that takes care of each other, but only after I've taken care of my own needs and comforts.

It's no wonder Jesus kept his disciples in the dark because he knows that while we want his kind of world, while we long for his kind of reign, while we pray for his kind of future, we don't want it to cost us much or even anything.

Jesus is one of the few among us, maybe the only one prepared to pay the cost for God's way in the world. That's what he makes clear riding into Jerusalem offering the world his kingdom, unarmed, without coercion, destruction, or violence. That's what this political drama makes clear on the streets of Jerusalem. The disciples already knew that Jesus chooses God's way in the world. Now they know that he is ready to pay the full cost for that kind of living.

As reluctant as we are to allow him to enact this costly drama- as reluctant as we are to want to participate in it- as reluctant as we all are to risk what Jesus risked, to give what Jesus gave, to die like Jesus died, we know this side of the drama – the drama of his life, his death, and his resurrection - that there really is no other way to live.

Living under the eternal fear of violence is no way to live.

Living as a hostage to all our stuff or to the empty promises of an omnipotent global economy, or the unsteady, invisible hand of the market is no way to live.

Living afraid of strangers, afraid of not having enough to live on, afraid of sharing, afraid of trusting each other with all of the imperfections of community – that's no way to live.

We know from the Jesus story, from the whole story, that God's way in the world is worth the risk of living and dying. The kingdom that is offered, the life that we gain really is worth the cost.

So though I'm not ready to give away everything that I own, to make myself vulnerable every time for peace, to open myself every time to strangers, to give myself over completely to community, still I won't protest when I see Jesus enacting his dangerous drama on the streets of our city, offering a nonviolent witness in the face of so much murder.

Though I know the details of his plan, I won't protest when I see him openly challenging the kings of this world who promise salvation through consumption, security through violence, freedom through endless work.

I won't try to dissuade him from risking everything even though I don't believe a life of generosity, of peace, and hope and love should require any cost. I won't try to stop him even though I don't want him to take unnecessary risks, even though I don't want to watch him suffer, even though I don't want him to die.

No, I might just pick up a palm branch and wave him on. Or maybe I'll help him find the colt that he needs – take some small, but important role in helping him to pull off this drama.

I'll take a step closer to his path, in this ritual drama that we observe until one day, maybe I too will know what it feels like to live freed from every fear –

freed to give all the time,
freed to love all the time,
freed to welcome all the time,
freed to trust God's way all the time.

I too will know that the joy of God's kingdom, of God's way of living is more than worth the cost.