

SERMON: What Are You Doing?

3-28-21

TEXT: Mark 11:1-11

Our family was attending a concert one Christmas when my son was about ten years old. I think it was the Springfield Symphony Orchestra along with a combined choir from local colleges. Of course, at his age my son didn't have much experience with such events, but he was enjoying the music. Toward the end of the concert, the choir began to sing the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah. In my experience - and probably yours - it's a tradition that the audience stand for this piece, and that was no different this evening. Needing no direction, the whole audience stood. But my son remained seated, looking up at me with a confused and almost frightened look on his face. "What's happening?" he questioned. "What are we doing?" Wanting to be lost in the music, I was aggravated with his rather dense stubbornness. I did not hide my frustration or impatience very well, when I looked at him and demanded, "Just stand up!"

Lucas was never much for surprises, and never one to simply follow the crowd. In that way it was a good thing. I was relieved that - even as a teenager - peer pressure had very little effect on him. But I also learned that he always needed at least a five minute warning before we left the house for any reason. And he developed a habit of repeating my statements back to me, as if needing to confirm

what he heard and then let in sink in for a moment. Example: “Lucas, we’re going shopping for shoes.” “*We’re going shopping for shoes?*” “Yes.” “*Why?*”

I am so looking forward to the day when his son learns the word, “why”?!

Jesus knew that his disciples would be questioned when he instructed them to find a colt in a nearby village and bring it to him. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I’ve always brushed by this, taking it as an extraneous detail, perhaps included just to appease the bystanders (and the readers of the gospel) that the donkey was only being borrowed, not stolen. No commandments broken here.

But this week for some reason, the question really jumped out at me. I found it terribly ironic that the question refers to the minor act of taking the donkey, when it really is much more appropriate for each major, life-changing event that happens from that moment on. From Palm Sunday and throughout Holy Week, at every turn, I want to ask, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I want to ask Jesus: “What are you doing?” “You know what’s going to happen to you. You know that the same crowd praising you today will be calling for your death later in the week. You know you’re not the kind of king they’re

hoping for. Why are you allowing them to spread their cloaks on the road and wave palm branches as if you were royalty? Why do you allow them to cry out, *Hosanna! Save us!*, when you know the salvation you offer is nothing like what they are expecting?”

We often describe Palm Sunday as the “triumphal entry” of Jesus, but for those of us who know what’s coming, it is hardly triumphant. It feels more like a trap.

In an article I came across just last week, I read, “Historians tell us that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he asked his disciples to secure a donkey for his journey down the mountain into the holy city. In their compelling book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Last Days in Jerusalem*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue that two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday two thousand years ago.... Every year during Passover - the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem’s population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000 - the Roman governor of Judea [Pontius Pilate, at the time of Jesus] would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. He would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome demanded their complete loyalty, obedience, and submission. The Jewish

people could commemorate their ancient victory against Egypt and slavery if they wanted to. But if they tried any real time resistance, they would be obliterated.”

(Debie Thomas, *Save Us, We Pray*, March 21, 2021, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net))

Though their ancestors had been freed from slavery in Egypt, their oppression continued under the Roman Empire.

“As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. Unlike the Roman emperor and his legions, who ruled by force, coercion, and terror, Jesus came defenseless and weaponless into his kingship. Riding on a donkey, he all but cried aloud the bottom-line truth that his rule would have nothing to recommend it but love, humility, long-suffering, and sacrifice.” (Debie Thomas, *Save Us, We Pray*, March 21, 2021, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net))

These are admirable qualities, to be sure - love, humility, long-suffering, and sacrifice - but not very prestigious, not necessarily very rewarding, and nothing that most people dream of achieving.

But, yes, Jesus knew what he was doing.

One commentary explained that Jesus was enacting a prophecy from Zechariah that a king would come to Jerusalem “humble and riding on a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9) In the Gospel of Mark, “Jesus enacts this prophecy presumably because of its counter-cultural image of a victorious king—humble on a colt rather than haughty on a warhorse. The importance of the allusion is signaled by the detailed account of Jesus’ instructing two of his disciples to find the colt and procure it for him (Mark 11:2-6). Mark does not want us to miss Jesus’ deliberateness.” (Ira Brent Driggers, Commentary on Mark 11:1-11, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), March 27, 2021)

“It is clear,” the commentary continues, “that Mark wants us to view Jesus as a king, but only by helping us re-imagine the very concept of king in accordance with Jesus’ mission. It is a challenging journey that begins with the quotation of a royal coronation psalm at Jesus’ baptism - “You are my Son” (Mark 1:11, see Psalm 2:7) - and ends with repeated mockery of Jesus’ professed kingly status in his final hours - “Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” (Mark 15:32; see also 15:2, 9, 12, 17-20). Between these royal moments, Mark tells the story of Jesus on a mission, not to conquer peoples and land, but to restore broken humanity to its divinely created wholeness. That is the kind of king Mark calls us to follow, and the kind of kingdom Mark’s Jesus calls us to enter. (Ira Brent Driggers, Commentary on Mark 11:1-11, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), March 27, 2021)

While countless sources agree that Jesus indeed knew what he was doing, I'm afraid now that I've raised the question, it will continue to confront me as the events of the week unfold.

I will want to ask Judas, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?, when he shares a final meal with Jesus, hears him offer the bread with the words, "this is my body, broken for you," and still betrays his friend with a kiss.

I will want to ask the disciples, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?, when they fail to stay awake and pray with Jesus while he agonizes over his fate, praying, "Father, remove this cup from me."

I will want to ask Peter, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?, when he denies even knowing Jesus, not just once, but three times while Jesus stands trial.

I will want to ask Pilate, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?, when he washes his hands of responsibility and lets the angry crowd send an innocent man to death.

The question will haunt me, as well, as I ask myself, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?, when I fail to practice what I preach.

And when I realize that we, as his followers, have become comfortable and complacent about his crucifixion because Jesus did know what he was doing. As though his willingness to sacrifice himself took away the suffering. We'd rather skip over the pain - the emotional, the physical, the spiritual pain - that Jesus suffers the rest of the week. We'd prefer to assume that his sacrifice was just for certain people, instead of for the whole world. We'd rather jump from the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday to the glorious Son-rise of Easter morning.

WHAT ARE WE DOING? May we ponder our own complacency and recommit ourselves to following Jesus all the way to the cross... to the glory of God!

AMEN.