

Which One?
Mark 11:1-11
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Pray with me:

O Lord, strong and mighty —
Through your word,
let us rest, not on our strength,
but on yours.
Let us follow, not our ways,
but yours.
Through Christ, our Lord, amen.

Symbols are a powerful means of communication. They can even be more powerful than words.

Pull out your iPhone and what symbol do you see on the back?

An apple with a bite taken out of it — “the forbidden fruit.” It’s hard to see this symbol and not think of Adam and Eve taking a bite out of that apple — the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now, do you really think it’s by chance that Steve Jobs chose to use the symbol of the forbidden fruit to sell you their products? Just one bite and your whole world will change.

Or what about if I put my thumb up? Surely you’ve used the thumbs up emoji by now. What does it mean? Sounds good. Great job.

But what if I put my thumb up while standing on the side of the highway? What’s it mean now. Context changes its meaning.

What if I hold up my index and middle finger up? Peace.

But what if I had just walked in the door of a restaurant and held those same two fingers up to the host? Table for two, please. Again, context changes that symbol’s meaning.

Do you see what I mean? I don’t have to say a word for you to get what those symbols mean, and even what they mean can change depending on where and when I used them. Symbols can be a powerful means of communication.

And they don’t just have to be *visual*. Symbols can also be *enacted*.

My dad was great at finding just the right punishment to fit the crime.

For example — I’ll pick on my brother since he is not here to defend himself — when my older brother lost his temper as a teenager, he had a habit of storming to his room

and slamming the door behind him. Mom must have told him a thousand times not to slam his door, but it was like clockwork. When he lost his temper, he slammed his door.

Then one day it happened. He lost his cool, stormed to his room, and slammed the door behind him. Dad must have already had the plan in his mind and anticipated this moment, because he watched quietly as it happened. And as soon as that door came crashing closed, he stood up, pulled a flathead screwdriver out of his back pocket, flipped it end over end as he walked to my brother's door, opened it, popped the pins out of the hinges, and carried the door out to the garage — all without saying a single word.

The symbolic act was clear: if you abuse it, you lose it.

My younger brother and I stared wide-eyed at what was happening. What if he wanted to be left alone? Wanted to sleep but the living room lights were still on? What if he wanted to change in privacy? *Was this even legal?*

Now, in all actuality, taking my brother's door didn't change his life much. He still had his TV and his Playstation. He still had his bed and his closet. He still got to eat with us and come and go as he pleased. I'm not sure that act affected him much at all. But, I can tell you, it had a profound effect on *me*.

I like my privacy. I like being able to close the door and not be bothered. Just ask any of the church staff... well, any of the church staff but Katie. She doesn't seem to be deterred by my closed door. So, after I saw my dad take that door off its hinges, I never slammed my bedroom door again.

You see, that's what a good symbol does. It speaks to us — sometimes without even uttering a single word.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus chose his symbol with great care.

Have you ever noticed how different Mark's version of this story is from the other gospels?

In Matthew, the whole city was astir. In Matthew, Jesus marched straight into the temple and drove out the money changers. In Matthew, children filled the streets. *But not in Mark.*

In Luke, the crowds don't chant "Hosanna," but instead echo the chorus of angels at Jesus' birth, shouting: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven." *Not in Mark.* In Luke, the Pharisees show up and tell Jesus to put a stop to it, and Jesus says, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would cry out." *But not in Mark.*

In John, they don't just wave leafy branches — as if any old shrub will do. They wave *palm* branches — the only gospel to provide that little detail. So what do we wave? *Palm* branches. But guess what? *Not in Mark*.

In Mark, the only thing that seems to matter — the central symbol around which Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is built — is that donkey; that colt that has never before been ridden. In fact, of the eleven verses that make up the triumphal entry in Mark's gospel, half have to do with obtaining the donkey.

Why did that donkey matter so much?

Because on that day, there were *two* processions coming into Jerusalem.

New Testament Scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, paint the picture like this:

"One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.

From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class...

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of the empire" (*The Last Week*, 2).

Imagine that imperial procession, if you can. Not *a* warhorse, but a cavalry of warhorses. Soldiers on foot. Leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling dust. The crowds lining the streets — some curious, some awed by it all, and some resentful of it.

Now, imagine the other side of town. There's a single man, a Jewish rabbi making his way into town. He's not surrounded by soldiers, but by peasants. He's not wearing armor, but sitting on a dirty old cloak. There are no poles with golden eagles mounted on them; just a bunch of branches being waved by those who walk with him. There's no stamping of feet, no clinking of bridles, no beating of drums; just the shouts of "Hosanna, hosanna — blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." And he's riding, not a massive, battle-tested warhorse, but a young, never before ridden donkey.

You know, in America, cars matter. They're more than what get us from point "A" to point "B." The ride we choose says something about us.

If you want to be seen as a tough guy, you saddle up on a Harley and not a moped; get a lift kit on your truck and don't bother with Prius. If you want to show how much money you've got, go for a Lexus and not a Honda Accord. If you want to show that you're "Colorado chic," buy a Toyota 4-Runner.

But what's true for us and our cars today was also true in biblical times.

In the Old Testament, horses were only equated with war. They weren't used for travel or agricultural purposes. They had one purpose — as instruments of war. Generals rode horses. It's why Deuteronomy 17 so adamantly demands that kings *not* multiply horses for themselves, because such kings wouldn't be known for times of peace, but for times of war. Such kings wouldn't be peacemakers, but warmongers.

Do you know what the Old Testament says about donkeys? Zechariah 9:9 reads:

"Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey..."

Humble. Peaceful. Proclaiming through the donkey he rode that he was not like the kind of kings that multiply horses for themselves.

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus went out of his way to ensure that his ride was not a horse, but a young donkey; was not a weapon of war, but an agricultural tool. Not a tank, but symbol of peace and humility. No one fights a battle on the back of a donkey.

Now what do you suppose he was trying to say to those who had ears to hear and eyes to see?

You see, context matters. That donkey is a whole lot less significant if you don't know that at the exact same time that Jesus was riding a donkey in from the East, Pilate was riding a warhorse in from the West.

This past Monday, I asked the Brown Bag Bible study group to recall that famous photo of Tiananmen Square, where the lone person stood in protest in front of that line of tanks. Then I asked them to imagine Jesus sitting on a colt in place of that lone protestor, and I said, "Now, you have an image of what Jesus was trying to say by riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey on that day."

Symbols sure can be powerful, can't they? Just the right symbol at just the right moment can say more than any word can utter.

Two processions entered Jerusalem that day. One was built on power, the other on peace. One promoted the empire of Rome, the other Kingdom of God.

The same question faces those of us who want to be faithful to Jesus today:

Which procession are we in?

Which procession do we want to be in?

This is the question of Palm Sunday.

Amen.