

**Psalm 118:19-29**

**Mark 11:1-11**

**April 9, 2017**

**Palm/Passion Sunday**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

***Journey to the Cross***

**PALM SUNDAY PERFORMANCE ART**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Belgian artist, Francis Alÿs and 500 volunteers shoveled an entire giant sand dune outside Lima, Peru and actually moved it a few inches. He also pushed a giant block of ice through Mexico City for nine hours, until the ice melted.

Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal lived in a gallery space for a month. Observers watched him through a webcam and fired remote controlled paintball guns at him.

Chinese-Canadian artist Terence Koh crawled on his knees around an 8-foot tall mound of rock salt for twenty-five days in a gallery in New York City.

Artist Man Bartlett spent twenty-four hours in the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York City, asking people where they were going and where they had been, then live-tweeting their answers.

Just last month, French artist Abraham Poincheval spent three days inside a 12-ton rock, in a space just big enough for him to sit up and to store some water, soup, and dried meat. Poincheval once spent fourteen days sewn inside a stuffed bear. He plans to attempt to hatch a dozen eggs by sitting on them for several weeks.<sup>1</sup>

It's called "performance art," which is defined as "a nontraditional art form with political or topical themes that typically features a live presentation to an audience or onlookers (as on a street)." Performance art "usually consists of four elements: time, space, the performer's body, and a relationship between audience and performer." Performance art "may be either scripted or unscripted, random or carefully orchestrated; spontaneous or otherwise carefully planned with or without audience participation."<sup>2</sup>

This Lenten journey to the cross began with Jesus on the road with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way, Jesus asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27) Imagine one of Jesus' disciples approaching him and asking, "Master, some say John was the Messiah. Some say Elijah will return. Some look for their king. Lord, who is the Messiah and what will he be like?"

Jesus answers, "A man drew near to Jerusalem with his friends and followers. He sent two of them into a town opposite them with instructions about what they would find when they got there. When they arrived, immediately they found things as he said they would be and secured a donkey for him. They spread their coats on the donkey and the man rode among them into Jerusalem at the festival time. People in the crowd spread their cloaks and leafy branches on the road. A crowd went ahead of him and followed him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the

highest heaven!’ There were some who understood the meaning of the man on the donkey.” Then Jesus says, “Who do you say the Messiah is? If you have ears to hear and eyes to see, then understand.”

Jesus didn’t have to tell a parable about the Messiah to satisfy his follower’s curiosity. Finally arriving in Jerusalem at the beginning of the great festival of the Passover, Jesus began his final week by acting out the parable of Palm Sunday. Jesus’ performance art confronts us as sharply as any of Jesus’ other parables. As we celebrate Palm Sunday 2017, how do we understand this performance art, this Palm Sunday parable? Is today simply a warm-up for our glorious celebration next Sunday morning? Do we think Palm Sunday is **only** the triumphal entry of a victorious King? Are we going to jump directly from today’s Hosannas and palms to the Hallelujahs and lilies of Easter? On this Palm Sunday, is there any sense of the bitter-sweetness of Jesus’ long-awaited arrival in Jerusalem? Is there any sense of the humiliation, pain, rejection, and death Jesus will suffer before Easter morning dawns?

When Jesus appeared on the Mount of Olives and began riding down one mountain and up another to the temple, some of his followers must have been stirred deep in their souls. Everything seemed to be falling into place for the coming of the Messiah. According to tradition, the Messiah of deliverance was to appear at Olivet. It was an opportune moment for the Messiah to show up. The Roman occupation was heavy. The Jewish pilgrims were streaming into Jerusalem to observe the Passover festival, when they celebrated how God set them free from an oppressive super-power and delivered them into the Promised Land.

Since the term “performance art” didn’t come into use until the early 1960’s, it’s really anachronistic to call what Jesus did when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey 2000 years ago “performance art.” On the other hand, it’s a good description of the message he was sending that day. Think about the four elements of performance art: time, space, the performer’s body, and the relationship between the audience and the performer.

Time: Sunday, the first day of the week leading up to the greatest festival for the Jewish people, when they remembered, celebrated, and hoped for liberation.

Space: the Mount of Olives, where the Messiah was supposed to appear; Jerusalem, the holy capital city; and the temple, the center of Jewish religious and political life.

The performer’s body: riding on a donkey, soon to be delivered to the religious and political authorities to be abused and killed.

The relationship between the audience and the performer: the crowd in Matthew’s gospel calls him “Son of David,” in Luke “the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” in John “the King of Israel.” In Mark’s story, Jesus is hailed as “the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Much of the time, performance art is a political statement. In an interview about the connection between performance art and the act of protesting, a student artist described the “political element . . . atomic to performance art and this is because it is

confrontational. . . Framing the protesting with the mask of art provides the artist — particularly in an oppressed nation — the freedom to express himself or herself.”<sup>3</sup>

Many interpreters think Jesus’ Palm Sunday donkey ride was a planned political demonstration. Jesus is in control. He tells two of his disciples to go into the village and find a colt. He tells them what to say if anyone questions what they are doing. We might chalk this up to Jesus’ divinity and omniscience, but it’s even more telling if Jesus made prior arrangements so he could engage in some performance art and send a message. Three times along the way to Jerusalem, Jesus told his disciples point-blank what was waiting for him in Jerusalem and what kind of Messiah he really was. It’s as if Jesus decided it was finally time to quit talking about what kind of Messiah he really was and show them.

In their book called *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe two processions entering Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30 A.D. “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. . . On the opposite side of the city, from the West, Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion. . . Pilate’s procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology. Jesus’s procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’s procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup>

As we celebrate Palm Sunday, we can’t overlook the shadows that come with the cloaks and palms. We can’t turn a blind eye to Maundy Thursday or Good Friday in our eagerness and longing for Easter dawn. It has been said that Mark shakes us up with the good news about Jesus. Jesus continues to come into our lives as the Messiah who shows us a new way, an alternative vision, the kingdom of God — a new way of living, of loving, of being, of serving others. The man on the donkey exceeds our expectations, even as he shakes us up and shatters our preconceived notions of what kind of Messiah he should be.

The man on the donkey acts out the kind of obedience and commitment that is expected of us as his disciples. Jesus rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of a poignant week of history, when the worst of human actions and the best of human hopes came together. Jesus’ power and victory are not diminished because of his suffering on Thursday and Friday. At the same time, we can’t disregard Jesus’ suffering as the Son of Man just because he was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. We understand Jesus’ victory on Easter Sunday in light of his suffering on Good Friday. We welcome on Palm Sunday the One who comes in the name of the Lord, the one who suffers **and** who is victorious.

While I appreciate the impact and importance of the arts, I’m not sure I really get the meaning of moving an entire sand dune a few inches or pushing a block of ice

through a city or living in a gallery space for a month or crawling around a mound of rock salt on my knees for twenty-five days or living inside a boulder or a stuffed bear.

But, how we understand — how we “get” — Jesus’ performance art on a donkey on a spring Sunday afternoon in 30 A.D. will determine how we celebrate Palm Sunday. How we understand Jesus’ performance art on a donkey will determine how we celebrate next Sunday morning when we sing “Alleluia!” and say, “Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!”

Even more than that, how we understand and accept Jesus’ performance art on a donkey on a spring Sunday afternoon in 30 A.D. will determine how we live our lives. Because the man on the donkey tells us, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. . .Whoever wants to be first must be last of all . . . whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Imagine someone asking you, “Who is the Messiah?” You might respond, “A man rode into Jerusalem on a donkey . . .” Better yet, you might show them who the Messiah is, by following that man on the donkey, wherever he leads.

***Let us pray: Almighty God, on this day Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly to suffer and to die and was greeted with branches of palm. Let these branches be for us symbols of martyrdom and majesty. May we who carry them follow Christ in the way of the cross which leads to life; through Christ who lives and reigns in glory with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The information about the first four artists was taken from Marina Galperina, “10 Contemporary Performance Artists You Should Know,” November 4, 2011 at [www.flavorwire.com](http://www.flavorwire.com). The information about Poincheval was taken from Agence France-Presse, “This French performance artist has entombed himself inside a boulder for a week,” at [ww.pri.org](http://ww.pri.org).

<sup>2</sup>Information about the definition of performance art is taken from: [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com), “Definition of performance art”; MoMA Learning at [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org); “Performance Art,” at [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org).

<sup>3</sup>Natasha Jessen-Peterson, “The Power of Performance: Art as Political Activism,” October 22, 201, Tufts Observer, at [www.tuftsobserver.org](http://www.tuftsobserver.org).

<sup>4</sup>Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), pp. 2-4.