

**Psalm 118:21-29**

**Mark 11:1-11**

**April 2, 2023**

**Palm Sunday**

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

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT: THE ROAD  
“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”**

***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.***

Mark Twain has been quoted as saying, “Actions speak louder than words, but not nearly as often.” Well, in today’s Palm Sunday story from the gospel of Mark, after giving his two disciples instructions about finding a donkey, Jesus doesn’t speak another word, so his actions definitely speak louder than his words.

It has been suggested that Jesus acted out a parable on that first Palm Sunday when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and offered himself as the Messiah. Imagine a follower of Jesus approaching him one day and saying, “Lord, some say John was the Messiah. Some say Elijah will return. Some look for their king. Lord, who is the Messiah?”

And Jesus answers, “A man drew near to Jerusalem with his friends and followers. He sent two of them into the village ahead of them with instructions about what they would find when they got there. When they arrived, immediately they found things as he had said. They secured a donkey and led it back to the man. They spread their coats on the donkey’s back and the man rode among them into Jerusalem at the feast time.”

“A crowd went before him and followed him, shouting ‘Hosanna!’ Some of the people spread their garments on the road, and others laid down leafy branches they had cut in the fields. It was as if they were preparing the way for a king. But, later in the week, the man was betrayed, denied, arrested, beaten, mocked, and crucified. He died and was buried, only to rise again.” And Jesus says to his follower, “Who do **you** say the Messiah is? If you have ears to hear and eyes to see, then understand!”

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, he confronted the people with decision time. His actions affirmed the fact and the character of his Messiahship. Maybe some were expecting a king who would ride in on a white horse and free them from the Romans. Maybe some were expecting the immediate dawn of a new age, the kingdom of Heaven come on earth. Maybe some were expecting a Messiah — but not the kind of Messiah Jesus turned out to be.

In 1964, filmmaker Rolf Forsberg made a critically acclaimed yet controversial short movie. The half-hour film called *Parable* — in which there is no talking — situates the Gospel story in the unusual setting of a traveling circus.

At the beginning of the film a parade of brightly painted circus wagons passes by. On the wagons are carved and painted figures representing various countries of the

world. The loud circus music of the calliope adds to the pomp and excitement of the parade. After the last fancy circus wagon passes by, there is a pause in the parade. The music changes to a gentle tune as a solitary figure, dressed all in white, comes into the picture. He rides far behind the parade — on a little donkey.

During the first part of the film, the clown dressed in white helps various victims of oppression in the circus by assuming their places: he takes on the drudgery of watering the elephants; he replaces a black man as the target at the dunking booth and endures the insults and the balls that are thrown at him; he takes the place of the woman in the magician's box when the swords are plunged into the box. The people he helps and the people who are mistreating them end up following him, but for different reasons, as you soon find out.

Finally the clown in white comes to the Big Top, where Magnus the Great is manipulating human puppets on strings high in the air above the ring. As the clown begins to dust off the shoes of the spectators, they begin to laugh. Magnus the Great is upset because the people are paying attention to the clown rather than to him.

The clown straps himself into the marionette's harness and is hoisted into the air. Suddenly the ring is filled with the people who had been mistreating the circus workers. One hurls balls at the clown while another thrusts his sword at him. Magnus the Great raises the clown even higher into the air. Then the dying clown screams, spreads his arms out in a cross shape, and dies.

As the film draws to a close, the camera pans from place to place to show the people who had been freed from their oppressors by the clown. The people whom the clown helped have formed a caring community of their own in which they help each other. Back under the Big Top, Magnus the Great sits dejected in his seat. He tries in vain to bring the clown back to life.

Finally, the camera finds Magnus the Great sitting in his trailer, staring at himself in the mirror. He picks up a jar of white grease-paint and slowly begins to apply it to his face. As the film ends, the circus parade is on the move again. The brightly painted circus wagons pass by as the loud music plays. Then, the music fades away — and the clown appears again, riding a donkey down the side of the road, following the parade.<sup>1</sup>

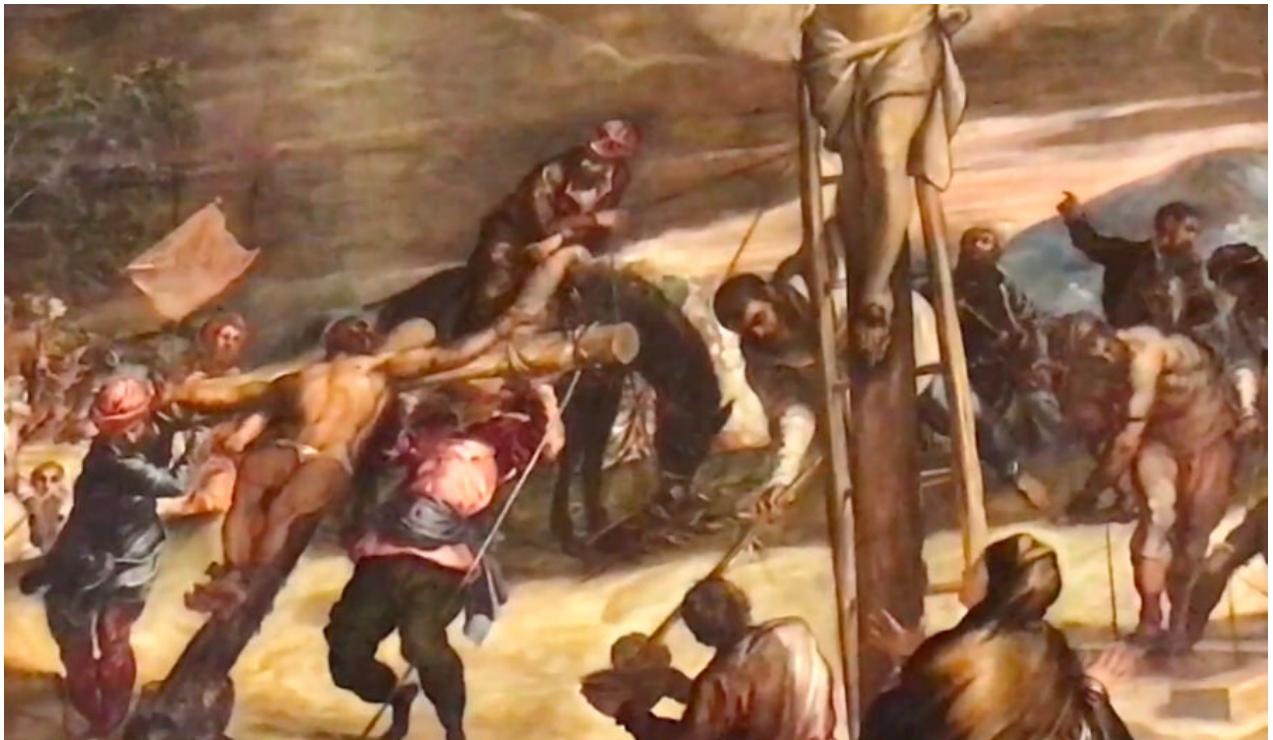
*Parable* was commissioned by the New York City Protestant Council of Churches for their World's Fair pavilion. According to Mark Quigley of the UCLA Film & Television Archive, *Parable* “was met with threats of protests and violence before it even premiered as word leaked that the film dared to depict ‘Christ as a clown.’” He says, “Forsberg tapped the primal, collective subconscious and conjured light and shadow to project the Gospel with allegory, enigmatic symbolism and poetic lyricism, boldly confronting souls in ways previously unimagined.”<sup>2</sup>

Without using any words, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, projected the Gospel with symbolism, and boldly confronted souls in ways previously unimagined — just as he did throughout his earthly ministry and as he certainly did in the last week of his life on earth. In her commentary article on Mark's Palm Sunday story, Margaret Grun Kibben writes, “Jesus' followers began to realize that ***their king, their Messiah, was out of their control. He was on a different game plan, no***

**longer consulting them or fitting their mold. This was not the king they had in mind.** This was not the Messiah they had expected. This guy was like a servant, one who instead of using his divine authority for his own good, or more importantly their own good, abandoned all control to the one on High.” (emphasis added) Then she goes on to apply that same reasoning to our lives this Holy Week: “Mark seems as eager to shake us up as he is to proclaim the good news. Or maybe his whole intention is to shake us up with the good news. Only when Jesus relinquishes his control to God can the gospel unfold. Only through Jesus’ obedience is God’s plan played out, a plan far greater than any human design. Only through Jesus’ willingness to be led to the cross would all our desires for a ruler, a friend, a Messiah be accomplished -- **but on God’s terms and not ours.**”<sup>3</sup>

As we hear this Palm Sunday story, the apparent weakness and humility of a Messiah on a donkey hardly inspires confidence and hope for many people — then and now — much less a Messiah who winds up hanging from a cross less than a week later. As we hear Mark’s story of the first Palm Sunday, we are confronted by Jesus’s acted-out parable in his deliberate pilgrimage to Jerusalem to face death on our behalf. Who do we **say** the Messiah is?

Just as actions speak louder than words, so is a picture worth a thousand words. Tintoretto was a 16th century Italian painter. He worked so fast in his painting he was



nicknamed “Il Furioso” or “The Furious.” In 1565, Tintoretto painted the crucifixion of Jesus.

You can only see Jesus's legs in the painting. On the left, one of the two thieves is being lifted up; on the right, the other thief is being nailed to his cross. A man on the ladder is dipping a sponge into the vinegar to give Jesus something to drink.

If you look more closely, behind the man being lifted up on a cross, you will see a man sitting on a donkey. The donkey is eating dry palm fronds. One interpreter says, "It requires little imagination to think of this leaf as one of those someone had excitedly waved in the crowd which came out to greet Jesus; someone who had shouted while he waved the leaf: 'Hosanna! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' They had seized whatever they could get their hands on, waved them, and then thrown them at the feet of this little donkey, on which the one they hailed as their leader had entered the city. Now the donkey is nibbling one of the palm leaves and the king is scorned. Their enthusiasm had withered — withered leaves were left."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus set it all in motion as his actions spoke louder than his words when he made his way from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Two thousand years later, the gospel still asks us, "Who do **you** say the Messiah is?" In his commentary on the gospel of Mark, Lamar Williamson writes about following in Jesus's way, not just on that first Palm Sunday but on Palm Sunday 2023 "Some will follow in his way, acknowledging that they know him in part. They will know failure, as did that first, fickle crowd. But by the grace of a crucified and risen Lord, those who continue to follow him may come also to share, in some measure, his lowliness and his strength."<sup>5</sup>

As we follow Jesus into Holy Week and throughout life, may our actions always speak louder than our words. As 1 John 3:18 puts it, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

***Let us pray: LordGod, as we sing our 'Hosannas' today may we remember also that which you were riding toward; the suffering and rejection, pain and humiliation, the cruel Cross. And let us look forward to the joy of Easter Day when you rose from death to reign forever. Help us, as we daily lay our lives before you, to live the resurrection life that acknowledges Jesus as Lord and King over our lives. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>You can watch *Parable* on YouTube at Parable | The Rolf Forsberg Collection | Parable | Clarence Mitchell | Jack GwynneVision Video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S95afVrh0AI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S95afVrh0AI)

<sup>2</sup>Mark Quigley, “Rolf Forsberg: The 50th Anniversary of Parable (1964) . . . And a Happy 90th Birthday!” July 12, 2014 at [www.cinema.ucla.edu](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu).

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Grun Kibben, “Mark 11:1-11,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, April 2003, Volume 57, No. 2, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup>From *LectionAid*, Volume 7, Number 2, Year A, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 205.