



A Coup in the Making

Mark 11:1-11

Sunday, March 17, 2024

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Gospel Lesson, Mark 11:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

A Coup in the Making, Mark 11:1-11, page 2

¹⁰ “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Sermon, “A Coup in the Making” by Pastor Dave

The news coming out of Haiti is not good. It hasn’t been good for years, even decades, but today it’s even worse. Gangs now control much of the country. It is essentially a failed state, with the lowest per capita income of any country in the western hemisphere, and it is among the lowest on the planet.

Guy Philippe, who helped lead a coup in Haiti in 2004, returned to Haiti last year after serving a prison sentence in the U.S. On Friday, March 8, Philippe demanded that Prime Minister Ariel Henry resign; he had been in exile in Kenya. Guy Philippe wants to become president, and this past Monday, he may have moved one step closer to his dream when Henry resigned. His announcement was met with cheers and celebrations in some quarters of Haiti. Plans are to form a transitional presidential council, but at last check, Haiti is still in the throes of chaos and violence. Please pray for peace and stability in Haiti.

Almost every coup attempt carries with it certain characteristics. Perhaps the three most common characteristics of a coup attempt are:

1. **A charismatic populist leader** who is ready to unseat the powers that be. We nearly saw that twice in the past nine months in Russia. Last June, Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the private military Wagner Group, launched a rebellion in Russia. The rebellion came to an end with the death of Prigozhin last August 23. The second populist leader in Russia has been a long-time critic of Vladimir Putin, Alexei Navalny. But like Prigozhin before him, that near-coup came to an end with the suspicious death of Navalny this past February 16 in Siberia.
2. **A glimmer of hope and even celebration.** Both Prigozhin and Navalny brought secret hope to the Russians. However, I can’t help but think of a song by the Who. Lead singer Roger Daltrey opens “Won’t Get Fooled Again” by proclaiming, “We’ll be fighting in the streets.” That sounds like a coup in the making. Then after smiling and grinning “at the change all around,” he concludes with “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.” I wonder how much positive change Prigozhin and Navalny would have actually brought to Russia, just as I wonder how much positive change Guy Philippe will actually bring to Haiti—if he indeed becomes president of that land.
3. **Chaos and violence.** Despite the glimmer of hope which is often seen in coup attempts, there is nonetheless a dramatic rise in violence, giving way to chaos and anarchy. We saw some of that on January 6, 2020, in our nation’s capital. And certainly chaos and violence abound in Haiti’s coup in the making.

Three characteristics of a coup: a charismatic populist leader. A glimmer of hope with celebrations. And chaos and violence.

A Coup in the Making, Mark 11:1-11, page 3

All three of these are found in the Triumphal Entry of Jesus Christ. And make no mistake about it: the way Christ entered Jerusalem and the way he was greeted could only be described as seditious: It was a coup in the making! It was Passover time! Freedom time! The annual celebration of when God delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage. Surely this would be the time when God would deliver his chosen people out of Roman bondage.

Everything Mark tells us in this brief account of how Jesus and his disciples arrived at Jerusalem is designed to emphasize Jesus as King. He decides to ride into the city, commandeering a colt for his purpose, acting with sovereign freedom. With the way Jesus defied authority; with the way Jesus performed miracles—healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, making the lame to walk—and even raising the dead! —Jesus was that charismatic, populist leader. And now he was poised to unseat the powers that be.

Just look at the scene's climax: You don't spread cloaks on the road—especially in the dusty, stony Middle East! —You don't spread cloaks on the road for a friend, or even a respected senior member of your family. You do it for royalty.

And you don't cut branches off trees to wave in the streets just because you feel somewhat elated; you do it because you are welcoming a king.

The people of Jerusalem cherished a memory: Two hundred years before, Judas Maccabaeus defeated the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes, entered Jerusalem and cleansed and rebuilt the Temple. And the people waved ivy and palm branches as they sang hymns of praise. Judas Maccabaeus started a royal dynasty which lasted a hundred years; the story is told in 2 Maccabees 10:1-9.

The point Mark wants to make is clear: the disciples and the common people of Jerusalem believed that Jesus is the true and rightful King of the Jews, and he was on his way to the capital city to be hailed as such. This was the moment for his royal reception.¹ So the crowd cried out, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" And it was a dangerous, seditious prayer. Without question, the crowd believed this was the beginning of the end of Roman rule over Israel. But in the cheers of the crowd, the praise of the crowd, we find not just a glimmer of hope, but an all-out celebration.

And then...nothing happened. The scene ends dramatically. Jesus goes into the Temple, looks around, and comes out again. He goes back to Bethany, just two or three miles away, but away from the crowds, and he lodges there for a couple of days leading up to Passover. Because Jesus knew that soon the chaos and violence would break out because he knew the coup wasn't over.

In just a few days, Jesus would be arrested on trumped up charges in a series of illegal trials. He would be stripped and whipped and nailed to a tree where he would die a horrific, violent death. And for all intents and purposes, it would look as though the coup had come to an end, for the charismatic, populist leader had been murdered. And we know that when

¹ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, pg. 147.

A Coup in the Making, Mark 11:1-11, page 4

charismatic populist leaders are murdered, revolutions die with their deaths. Just look at Yevgeny Prigozhin. Just look at Alexei Navalny.

But what the disciples didn't know then—and what we know now—is that death is the precise way in which Christ would overthrow the powers that be: not political powers of this earth, but the powers of sin, death, and the devil. For Christ knew that there was only one way to kick down the doors of death: Christ knew that the doors had to be kicked down from the inside out. Christ knew that the only way to defeat death was to die first.

And so he died.

And that hope which shined so brightly on that Triumphal Entry Day; that hope which seemed to die by week's end sparked back to life just three days later, on Easter Sunday morn. And as Mary and Joanna and Salome went to the tomb, they found that the sealed stone which was supposed to forever lock their beloved Jesus in the tomb had been rolled away. And it slowly dawned on the grieving women that the coup had not failed. It had succeeded beyond their wildest hopes and imaginations, and they were now themselves rebels of a new kingdom. And they could now celebrate and “tell how Christ, the world's Redeemer, as a victim won the day.”

But that's a story for another sermon.