

Mark 11: 1-11 “It’s In the Details” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/24/24

Something I’ve never understood about our story for today was why we get so many details in the different Gospel texts about how to find a colt or donkey and what to do with it once the disciples locate it. Then we get a nearly word-for-word repeat of the donkey procurement after it has happened. It does not make for on- the-edge-of-your-seat reading. Scholar Scott Hoezee likens it to being given the recipe for chocolate chip cookies then describing it step-by-step as someone follows the recipe. What is with all the donkey detail, I ask? Is this supposed to be a small miracle as Jesus reveals his ability to see into the future or see what is ahead of them in the village where the colt was tied up? If it is, it doesn’t exactly rank up there with walking on water or raising the dead. If you are the Son of God, this is more of a parlor trick than some grand miracle. Or is this some hint that Jesus had actually pre-arranged all this in a very earthly manner, including some encoded secret password so the owners will know it’s ok to let some strangers take off with their animal? And if so, is this supposed to show how intentional Jesus is about being marched to his own death in Jerusalem? Or is it supposed to show us that not only had Jesus pre-arranged this, but that he was also playing into the Old Testament prophecy for the arrival of the Davidic King into the Holy City of Jerusalem? Zechariah prophesied that the Messiah would come on a donkey, the foal of a donkey no less, rather than on some grand stallion. The problem is that if Jesus is intent on playing along with the long-expected prophecies, why does he go out of his way to not play into what the people are expecting? So many possibilities exist as to why we are subjected to a lengthy description for fetching a colt that you can feel free to take your pick – each has about as much credibility as the other. No matter which explanation you may choose, none seem to lend a great deal of inspiration to the sub-scene of a donkey delivery.

Is there something we are missing in the details of this palm-laden donkey ride into Jerusalem? After all, in some circumstances, details are critical, such as, when you wake up in traction at the hospital and your insurance agent says the good news is that your homeowners policy actually covers falling off the roof. The bad news is that it doesn’t cover hitting the ground. Kind of like those 72,000 folks who received word this week their homeowners’ policies are being discontinued because they might actually need them, living in

a fire-prone area. The details, as boring as they may be, sometimes really matter. As one author wrote, “The difference between education and experience is that education is what you get from reading the small print. Experience is what you get from not reading it.” So in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we are presented with details, with the small print, that seems, at first glance, insignificant compared to the big stuff to come. Why bother with such things?

The truth of what we call Palm Sunday is that this is not a simple celebration that happened a long time ago to give Christians, young and old, a chance to whoop it up with some palm fronds every year the week before Easter. Instead, this is a story fraught with mystery, especially in the context of Mark’s gospel. In Mark, the disciples have witnessed Jesus time and time again shushing those who came even remotely close to identifying him as the Messiah. This had to be confusing for them. Thus, this particular day in Jesus’ last week on earth must have given them such hope, a bubbling excitement that they were finally moving forward toward the political victory God’s Messiah would accomplish. Did Jesus telling those disciples, who were assigned donkey detail, what to look for and what to say have any effect on them? Some speculate that the two chosen for donkey detail were James and John, the same two who just verses earlier were arguing who would sit at the right hand of Jesus when he is crowned ruler. Now they are looking for a pitiful donkey to walk beside instead. Were they surprised to find things exactly as Jesus had described it and did that give them any idea of who he was, of what he was doing? Or were they too busy that day parading around with their heads held high, confident in their newfound popularity? All the details are off-script somehow, from the donkey, to the way that only some of Jesus’ friends seem to be shouting the slogans you’d expect, to the way that the man himself doesn’t have his face set in the shining megawatt mask of charisma. But Jesus is clearly headed to the Temple, and that in itself has implications.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas says Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem is an unmistakable political act. He has come to be acknowledged as king in direct opposition to Rome’s Jewish puppet King Herod and the more powerful Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. Yet Jesus isn’t the king people expected as he upends all our notions of power and rule. Although it seems foreign to people like us who live with a notion of separation of church and state,

real or unreal these days, the fact that Jesus is going to the temple is perhaps more important than his triumphant entry into the capitol. Jesus doesn't go to confront the "powers that be" but instead, the text says, he looks the temple over and then leaves quickly only to return the next day. He goes back to cleanse the temple of those things that keep it from being a "house of prayer for all nations." It's this act that stirs the religious leaders to seek his death. Jesus confronts them because without true worship of God, there is no way to know what true politics, what true community leadership might be. Jesus is reclaiming the people's identity which is directly connected to Israel's God rather than any other authority. His confrontation with the temple merchants is a sign of the realm he seeks to establish where tables of greed are overturned, humility and self-confidence are restored, nonviolent activism brings social change, loving-kindness overturns hate, and every obstacle is removed that keeps us from our Creator.

This past summer, a movie hit the cinemas which has forever changed the landscape of female identity and empowerment. Not just a record-breaking summer blockbuster, the movie Barbie was anything but predictable. The movie opens up in Barbie-land, a parallel reality where all Barbies live in the blissful belief that they have solved all problems of sexism in the real world simply by their existence. Every little girl can grow up to be anything she wants to be as we see all sorts of Barbies doing all sorts of jobs, including President Barbie who presides over a just republic while Journalist Barbie wins the Pulitzer Prize. The conflict arises when stereotypical Barbie and her loyal Ken journey to the real world and discover that sexism is still very much alive, that Barbie's body is no longer her own and is subject to the rules created by the patriarchy. Ken finds the thrill of dominance and unearned power just because he was born a man and brings that back to Barbieland, upsetting the feminist utopia. Thankfully, Stereotypical Barbie's human companion, Gloria, and her daughter Sasha know a thing or two about the insecurity at the heart of patriarchy. Using tactics as old as a Greek comedy, and with the help of all the "weird" Barbies who live on the outskirts of Barbieland, the Barbies set out to restore paradise. One of the high points of the movie for me is when the Kens meet on the beach for a macho showdown, which morphs into a magnificent song and dance number recently replayed on the Oscars. The Kens realize that their longing for

patriarchy was just a cover for their own empty inner lives. Ken sings, “Is it my destiny to live and die a life of blind fragility?” as a bunch of other Kens fall into dance alongside him. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to watch a war movie again without wondering if the warriors could just dance out their pain and vulnerabilities instead. Meanwhile, Barbie is on her own personal identity journey that leads her to find her creator, Ruth Handler, the original co-founder of Mattel and Barbies. Ruth acts as a guiding figure to help Barbie understand who she is, her purpose in life, and inspires her to choose her own path rather than being subjected to false pretenses.

I doubt very many people watched this movie through the lens of theology, but I couldn’t help myself. In it, I saw a metaphor for one entering what is defined as the “real world,” as Jesus entered Jerusalem, which is filled with greed, oppression, subjugation, and a complete disruption of how life was created to be. The view is heart-wrenching, and Barbie cries for the very first time. Jesus must have understood that disappointment as the Gospel of Luke says that as Jesus drew near and saw the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it. That detail is often overlooked but even there, tears are shed when creation is fractured. Additionally, whereas all sorts of expectations are levelled at the protagonist in our movie, very few of them had anything to do with who she really was or her life purpose. Still, she sets her face towards social change and seeks to restore a more perfect balance in the universe. Likewise, it is very easy for us to cast Jesus into a role of our own choosing. We overlook what seem to be minor details, believing he will champion our dreams while disrupting the designs of our enemies. But remaining true to his calling, Jesus operates with different priorities and to a different end. Therefore, our calling on this Palm Sunday is to pay attention to the details. Keep in our sights and our resolve the universe God seeks to establish where tables of greed are overturned, humility and self-confidence are restored, nonviolent activism brings social change, loving-kindness overturns hate, and every obstacle is removed that keeps us from our Creator.