

Leadership 101: Harnessed Strength

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God of light and love,
today, your Son Jesus marches into Jerusalem to save us.
Guide us, through the wisdom of your Spirit,
so that we might see what you're calling us to see,
know what you're calling us to know,
and feel what you're calling us to feel,
that we may respond to your call of grace
with joyful hearts and sound minds.

Amen.

Our scripture reading for this Palm Sunday comes from the gospel according to...

Scripture: Mark 11:1-10 (NRSV)

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

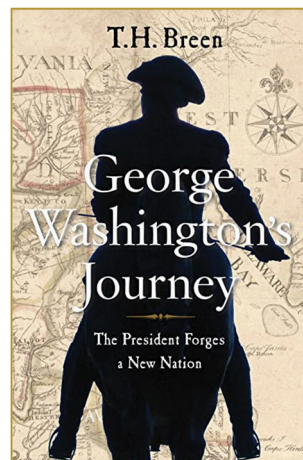
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Leadership 101: Harnessed Strength



T.H. Breen in his book *George Washington's Journey*, tells about the first thing Washington did after being elected to his first term of office—he visited the thirteen states. Washington drew on his wild popularity and hero worship to send a powerful and lasting message—America was now one nation and a union, not merely a collection of states.

This wasn't easy for Washington who was introverted and shy, but nonetheless, he had a strong sense that he alone could help this new nation grow into their new identity. The country first needed to see his presence and get to know him. But he had to be very conscious of the image he portrayed—not wanting to appear like he was the newly crowned King of the United States. So Washington travelled by open carriage on terrible roads, endured awful weather, and lodged at lousy inns, places that any regular American would stay in. He avoided staying in the extravagant houses of the rich. Today, the sign *"George Washington Slept Here"* marks his journey. And so his tracks to this day can be followed in that first trip across America. This wonderful story about Washington was at the beginning of his presidency.

On this Palm Sunday, our leader Jesus is in the last stage of his journey and he too is making a very deliberate statement. He wanted his people to know what the true Messiah was and wasn't like. Jesus had already revealed himself to the disciples in Caesarea Philippi in the far north. He had his time in Galilee, stayed in the hill country of Judea and the regions beyond the Jordan, and traversed the winding road to Jericho. Now he was approaching Jerusalem—his ultimate goal. Three times in Mark's gospel Jesus had already shared his fate that he would suffer and die and rise again on the third day. Mark tells us that Jesus told all this quite openly. And so today's event was carefully and conscientiously staged by Christ.

It was at the time of Passover. Thousands of Jews from the known world, Greece, Egypt, Babylon, Damascus, and Rome, would come to the Holy City to celebrate this Feast of Freedom. Pilate was also making an appearance in Jerusalem with his entourage at the same time. He too was sending a clear message to the Jewish people celebrating Passover.

"You may have been freed from Egypt, but you are certainly not free from slavery to Rome."

Pilate was not the only leader working on his messaging. Jesus was about to give a "show and tell" talk about Leadership 101 to all of Jerusalem.

It's no accident that Mark mentions Jesus was near the Mount of Olives. The prophet Ezekiel tells us in the Hebrew scriptures that it was there the Messiah would reveal himself. And this is how he would do it. Two of the disciples were given rather elaborate and mysterious directions by Jesus to find and bring back the riderless donkey that was set apart for Jesus and Jesus alone. The disciples listened to Jesus' instructions and did exactly as he said. Usually the disciples are put in a bad light in Mark, but here we see they're willing to follow the Lord's orders even when they seem puzzling or even odd. It's all about trust.

So everything was as Jesus said. They came back with the donkey and the disciples laid garments on the donkey as a makeshift saddle. As Jesus made his way into the city people began laying down cloaks and branches as a sort of pre-modern red carpet. This was something done only for royalty. The tradition for Passover was to walk into the Holy City on foot. Jesus was setting himself apart from everyone else riding in. This is the only time in the Scripture we see Jesus riding and not walking. It's here we clearly see Jesus' philosophy and practice of leadership demonstrated. He wasn't bashful about drawing attention to himself. He wanted people to know that he was a king—the Prince of Peace. He wasn't keeping secrets any more about his authority. Jesus would wield his power not for warfare, but for peacefare. And his choice of a donkey communicated that.

Stallions were not the only kingly animals. Donkeys were too. They were noble creatures in fact. You see, animals send messages. Just like the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, the places we live. When a king rode in on a stallion, they were highlighting military force. When a king rode in on a donkey, they were emphasizing their commitment to peace. The symbolism of the donkey showed the city of Jerusalem and Rome that Jesus came in peace and for peace. He was not here to shatter and annihilate his enemies.

Isaiah prophesies the very different mission of the Messiah:

"He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed."
([Isaiah 53:5](#))

What Jesus came for was a complete contradiction to what the people clamored for. The complete opposite of their expectations and yearnings. You see, you get into trouble when you challenge unquestioned assumptions and long-held beliefs, when you don't fit into the mold. And Jesus refused to play the part. Jesus is the man who obliterates all formulas. They can't contain him. Jesus was doing an act of Reframation—reframing and reinterpreting what the Messiah was about. You need to go back 150 years to fully understand this. 150 years earlier Simon Maccabeus entered into Jerusalem in victory. He utterly crushed Israel's enemies in battle. The inter-testamental book of 1 Maccabees describes the scene,

"The Jews made their entry into Jerusalem with acclamations carrying palms, to the sound of lyres, cymbals and harp, chanting hymns and canticles, since a great enemy had been crushed and thrown out of Israel."

But it goes back even centuries further to 2 Kings 9:13 where the people of Israel spread out their garments before the man of blood Jehu who was anointed king.

You need to know what this phrase means: *"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"* In the Hebrew Scriptures, *"the One who comes"* is a title, another name for the Messiah, *the One is who is coming*. Yes, Jesus the Messiah is the one who is coming and is here, but he's a very, very different "One" than they were expecting. A different "One" that many Christians long for today. We too want to force Christ into a role that isn't his. We want him to be our Messiah, made in our image rather than God's Messiah.

Jesus was putting the city of Jerusalem, and us, on notice about what kind of leader he was—that the people's popular ideas of the Messiah's leadership were utterly misguided. Jesus came to tell them their nationalistic dreams for the Messiah were all wrong—dead wrong in fact. If you look carefully at Mark's text, you see that the people proclaim their blessings not upon Jesus, but upon the coveted kingdom of David. It's as if they wanted a kingdom more than a king. They wanted power. Jesus indeed had power and authority, but he would exercise it much differently. The Messiah showed them something radical and revolutionary about leadership:

He came to die and *"to give his life as a ransom for many."*

But Jesus also had a message of hope in the midst of suffering:

- Resurrection, not crucifixion, would be the last word.
- Betrayal can be overcome.
- Justice and mercy will prevail.
- Sacrifice can lead to redemption.
- If you want to be great, you've got to become a servant.

You see, King Jesus' rule will be marked by bloodshed. Not the shed blood of his enemies in battle, but his own blood, shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus saves, not by military might, but by his death and resurrection. His kingdom is not an earthly one, but a heavenly one. The strength of our faith is tested when all the supports of popularity and influence and success are cut from under us. Will we stand by Jesus and identify with him in those moments? He has to go through it. We have to go through the crucible too—with Christ. The real challenge is to follow Christ when Christ is not triumphant and to keep following him when he's been arrested, mocked, accused, and crucified. Will we identify with this Messiah?

The crowds and disciples didn't necessarily understand what was going on. They cried out, "*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" Hosanna literally means "*God save us from our enemies.*" In other words, "Jesus, show our enemy Rome who is boss." ...but Jesus refused to take the bait. He used power for his holy purposes rather than letting power use him.

Josiah Osgood, Professor of Classics at Georgetown University, challenges the adage that "*absolute power absolutely corrupts.*" In his book *How to Be a Bad Emperor* that studies Rome's worst emperors, he says this:

"... power unmasks the true identity of leaders. It brings to light weaknesses that were there all along but might have been overlooked. For Julius Caesar this was arrogance; for Tiberius, a willingness to indulge his proclivity for personal pleasure; for Caligula, a fondness of cruelly taunting others; for Nero, an obsession with being the center of attention."

But Osgood noted that one Roman emperor stood out from this pattern: Marcus Aurelius. Marcus was chosen for absolute power... but somehow it not only didn't corrupt him, power made him better. Because of who he was, because of the time and hard work he invested in his younger years, that of reading and studying and seeking out good mentors, power revealed what Marcus had long striven to cultivate: a good soul and a good heart.

"When you have power, what does it reveal about your character?"

Power revealed Jesus' true character, too—his meekness. Remember meekness isn't weakness. Meekness is harnessed strength, disciplined strength, focused strength.

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine unpacks what Jesus' meekness really means:

- It's power to be a true King of Peace.
- A leader who listens, a king who shares resources and provides for the downtrodden.
- A ruler that builds up the people and protects them, rather than exploiting them,
- A leader that comes to serve rather than be served.

- A king who doesn't lord it over others, but instead suffers with them and for them.
- A leader that was strong in faith rather than merely being about brute strength.
- A meek king is righteous rather than wrathful.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is definitely here to save, and he does when we cry out to him.

Hosanna! Jesus, save us—

- Save us from our sins.
- Save us from our addictions and compulsions.
- Save us from our destructive behavior.
- Save us from despair, from pain, from oppression.

We all need Christ's salvation and the many forms of it. We're saved, not only by Jesus' death, but by death to ourselves. Death to our old assumptions and patterns. Something new can be reborn from that. Jesus' procession does not stop within Jerusalem but goes outside the city to Calvary and leads straight to the cross.

Christ's Leadership 101 challenges us to be leaders that follow in his footsteps: that we do as he does—take up our cross, renounce self, and follow Christ; that we courageously accept hardships and loss, humiliation and imprisonment, even death; that when the going gets tough, we keep going after Christ, even when it's hard, when we want to give up, when it's no fun. So, will we do more than raise our arms with palms held high, waving them and crying out "Hosanna! Hosanna!" Or will we take up our cross and follow him, through thick and thin. The choice is ours.

And so it begins, we walk through this week from palms now to passion, right by Jesus' side. It's time for us to see people, the way Jesus sees us. To watch for the ones who need hope, who need kindness, seeking the light, not the darkness that blinds us.

As you walk through these days of Holy Week, may the love you now know be spread to each person you meet along the way. And may God, who now blesses and keeps you in love, whose face shines upon you with grace from above, who looks on you with such joy and such favor, this God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, give you peace now and forever more.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Entry into Jerusalem*" by Jyoti Sahi, 2012

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