

Mark 11:1–10

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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Advent 1 gives us a set of texts that highlight entrances. Of course, Advent 1 is itself an entrance. This is the beginning of a new church year. We are turning now from the long and indeterminate season called the Sundays after Pentecost. Sometimes I think those fellows on the liturgical commissions are smoking something. They've lost their ability to tell time. We've now got a service that starts in the name of a doctrine instead of God's name, and the Sundays after Pentecost have turned into an indeterminate time after Pentecost. So it's kind of nice to know that it has an end and that we are back at the beginning of the cycle in Advent 1.

If that's not the most exciting thing in the world, at least we now have texts full of drama. First of all, Isaiah is setting off firecrackers and hoping for greater. He is calling on the good Lord to rend the heavens and come down. And we've got the apostle Paul once again messing around with his Corinthians. You could pray against having to serve a congregation like that; it's proof positive that you can survive just about anything. So Paul is entering, speaking of the Spirit's entrance, into this rough-and-tumble congregation that believes it has transcended time and is already at the end of the age. Not bad. Then we've got a nice little psalm, Psalm 80, calling out in the midst of God's hiddenness, hoping he will break the secrecy, come out of hiding, and enter.

And finally we've got a strange placement. I have to confess that I don't understand what the liturgical saints are doing. I've preached on this text on Advent 1, as I'm sure all of you have. But even having adjusted to the idea, I can't quite understand why we should have Palm Sunday, the Palm Sunday text, at the beginning of Advent. But I've been playing with it to get ready for you, and I've come to love this text. It is marvelously subtle, even in the midst of the parade.

So we'll go to work first on the supporting texts, as we usually do, and when we've worked a little with them, we'll see what we can do with this wonderful gospel. If it's a little out of place, it is still God's Word and has something to give us.

Isaiah 64: O That You Would Rend the Heavens

Isaiah's words in chapter 64 consist of a deeply moving prayer. Often enough in the book of Isaiah we hear God's voice addressing his people. Isaiah speaks on God's behalf. He has been called to be a prophet; he holds the office of prophet, and God speaks to him and through him on that basis. So we hear God speaking in the book of Isaiah in the first person, in the present, disclosing himself in his Word.

Now, the text we have been assigned is Isaiah's own words. God is not speaking here; Isaiah is. And though we are perhaps an audience the Holy Spirit had in mind along the way, we have to assume that Isaiah's audience is not us but the good Lord, and Isaiah is ticked. He has lived in the desolation and the sorrow and the emptiness long enough, and he is counting on the good Lord to put an end to all this malarkey, all this contrariness, all this emptiness.

I've been reading a wonderful book lately called *The Beauty and the Sorrow*, written by a Swede named Peter Englund. It is a history of the First World War based on the diaries of people who participated, whether as soldiers, as nurses, or as outside observers: people caught in the plight. You get a sense from it of the kind of disaster Isaiah is dealing with, where everything has fallen apart: Israel, Judah, exile, the whole sorry mess and desolation. Calling out of this dreadful circumstance, Isaiah calls on God to enter, and not merely to slide in or slip in or take a chair and sit down, but to rend the heavens and come down, to split them open and break in and take on the forces of desolation. We've had enough.

So the text gives us Isaiah's prayer. He calls on God to come down, to break the silence, to enter and take hold. Isaiah does so in the utter conviction, reinforced now by experience, that no human word and no human intervention is going to deal with this situation adequately. Israel has had enough of this, and so he prays that God will come out of hiding and deal with us now.

This is a prayer driven, of course, by faith. When faith cannot find God dealing with a situation as it hopes, it can only assume that God has gone into hiding, that the hiding is momentary, and that God will end it and come out. That is Isaiah's prayer: that God will break into the open once more. And so he prays that God will not remember their iniquity forever. The punishment has to end. The gospel has to take over once more.

Psalm 80: Let Your Face Shine

Psalm 80 comes out of the same kind of dire straits, even if it is not quite as vivid. With Isaiah, as with Shakespeare, there is a power with language that you can hardly imagine, and so any other psalm is going to seem like a short candle after Isaiah has sung. But here he goes. The psalmist is convinced, like Isaiah, that God is angry, that he is sick and tired of his people's prayers. The psalmist is fed up with the bread of tears and with having tears to drink. He understands himself to have become a scorn and a laughingstock, a joke put off by everybody around him.

But even in this abandonment, this sense that God has turned on him, that God has just dropped him and let him go, there is the sense that God can hear. One of my great teachers when I was at the University of Toronto years ago was a wonderful rabbi named Emil Fackenheim. He is dead now. He escaped from Germany after Kristallnacht, just when the Nazis were really starting to express their anti-Semitic zeal. He got away and made his way to Toronto, with the help of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, two French scholars who taught at the University of Toronto, and he taught there the rest of his career before moving to Israel, which was his dream. He was one of the most interesting and brilliant men I ever met and studied with. He was a Hegel scholar. I wasn't going to read Hegel with him, but I was really interested in his theological writings, and this is one of his comments I'll never forget.

When faith gets pressed, it accuses itself and calls out to the one in whom it is placed. That is, when faith faces circumstances it can't deal with, it never says simply, "God has failed me." Faith says, "I must have failed God, and God will not be angry with me forever." And so faith turns on itself in repentance and toward God in expectation.

That's what is happening here. Both Isaiah and the psalmist seek God's entrance in the midst of disaster, calling out to God in his hiddenness. They say, in the words of the psalmist, "Let your face shine, that we may be saved." Every human possibility is gone. Every hope of retribution is gone. Every conviction that things will get better is gone. There is just this: God is faithful to his word. He will not abandon his people, even if he punishes them thoroughly, and so he can be counted on to deliver. This is muscular and magnificent stuff, very much at home in hospital rooms, in broken marriages, and in despair. This is the stuff that carries us through the disasters. So these two lessons, the psalm and Isaiah, set a strong, dramatic tone

that drives through this Sunday. God will enter. God does enter. And as God will enter and does enter, he enters to save.

1 Corinthians 1: He Will Strengthen You to the End

Now 1 Corinthians 1:3–9 has a different kind of entrance. This is a gracious word. You know from the placement of the text that we are still in the literary foreplay, we could say. Paul follows a style of letter writing familiar in the Greco-Roman world, in which the first paragraph or paragraphs, which can be shorter, as in Galatians, generally consist of words of thanksgiving and praise and appreciation for the people to whom the letter is addressed.

Now, we know what is going to follow in this letter. There is a theory, of course, that there are not just two letters to the Corinthians but four, edited together in various ways to make two. I don't think we really need to follow up that idea, but it's interesting. We are in the midst of a conversation between Paul and his congregation, and we know what's going to follow: these people have attacked Paul for everything, including his looks. "You could at least look like Billy Graham, you dumbhead." They are disappointed in everything about him. They are pressing him, calling him a phony and a false prophet, the whole blame business.

But listen to the beginning of the letter. It is just as gracious as it can possibly be. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you." Well, maybe not right after the annual meeting, but most of the time. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus." Holy mackerel, here we go. "For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind." These are people who think the general resurrection of the dead has occurred, that they are beyond earthly limitations, and that normal standards therefore no longer hold. It sounds like the ELCA, for crying out loud.

And yet here he is: "For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind, just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you." Well, we could pray for that, for sure, and hope for it. "So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift." He is going to ream them when it gets right down to it, and he is going to teach them that the transcendent power of God comes to them in earthen vessels, so that they will realize it is his power and not ours. But in the meantime he speaks of Christ's entry into this congregation as utterly gracious. They are in turmoil, in rebellion, deluded, caught up in a

glory trip they think has no end. And yet here he is, in the name of Christ Jesus, speaking a word of grace and hope.

And then this beautiful, beautiful passage, which ought to be written over all the last Sundays of the indeterminate time after Pentecost as well as over the Advent season: “He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The one who is coming, the one whose coming is apocalyptic, whose coming destroys all earthly order, whose coming means a cleavage of all things, that one will strengthen you to the end. The one who is going to overturn everything will strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on his day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. There you go. You can sit on that for a good long time and just sing your heart out, because this is Christ Jesus. He is coming, he is ticked, he is going to overthrow all the powers of destruction and death, but he will strengthen you, and he will strengthen you to the end. “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son.”

Well, there you go. If you don’t want to go with the liturgical saints into the Palm Sunday parade in late November or early December, you can go to Corinth. You’re probably living pretty close to there anyway, in the theology of most of our congregations, so you might as well go to Corinth and have some fun. This is a great epistle. So we have an entrance that is full of grace, and it ends utterly graciously.

Mark 11: The Entrance into Jerusalem

With that, we turn to our gospel, Mark 11:1–10. We are coming back to the Gospel of Mark, and of course that’s like coming into your home airport. I love this gospel. It is so utterly powerful and so simple in its directness. But here we come to a really interesting text. The closer you read it, the more intriguing it gets.

We are accustomed, of course, to think of Palm Sunday, Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, as a big parade in which the whole city turns out. And so we have our own parades in congregations. People get palm branches and walk down the aisle singing, with the children leading them. It is a moment of glory as we head toward the inevitable reversal of his death on Good Friday and finally his resurrection on Easter morning.

But here the Palm Sunday story has been taken out of that context and isolated, and so we don’t have so much a parade as, I think, a street demonstration. This is really interesting. Mark has six verses devoted to the horse. We can be thankful for this: Jesus is at the right end of it,

and there is only one. By the time Matthew gets done with this text, there is a donkey and a colt, and by the time he gets Jesus moving to Jerusalem it sounds as if Jesus is sitting astride both of them. I didn't know he was that tall, or double-jointed. It's difficult to figure out how that worked; there's no detail. But here at least it is one animal, and he can sit on it. It takes quite a bit of the text to get that all set up.

And when Jesus finally gets on the colt, there are just a couple of verses of parade. If you can call it a parade. I think it was more like street theater, a small demonstration, a little like these Occupy Wall Street protesters now: a little bubble of confusion in the midst of people going about their daily work. It hardly seems as if the world stopped. It's more like a few people cutting branches, and Jesus' followers celebrating his entry into the city, following him, singing, praising him.

Then he goes to the temple, and there is another great big anticlimax, if you can call an anticlimax great big. That's just incredible. Apparently the people who were involved in this little demonstration, this street theater, whatever it was, went with him as he went to the temple. And when he got there, Mark says, he looked around, and since it was already late, he went out to Bethany to find a bed. What do you make of that? That's really interesting. This should have been the dramatic showdown of all showdowns. Here is Jesus, the Galilean preacher who has been preaching up there in the mixed-race, mixed-blood part of the country, who has been causing all kinds of apprehension and consternation among the religious authorities. He has been making his way toward Jerusalem for a long time, and now he finally gets there and goes to the temple, and where there should be a dramatic engagement with the religious authorities, he yawns and starts looking for the Bethany Holiday Inn, for crying out loud. What is this? That's just kind of strange.

But if we look more closely at this, it becomes even more intriguing. Those six verses about the colt appear to have been arranged beforehand. It's as though there is an offstage voice conducting this, a stage manager unfolding these events. Jesus knows about that colt beforehand, and we have no explanation of that. Jesus knows that the colt has been prepared for him and that everything is ready. When he sends his disciples, he tells them exactly where to go, as if he has been informed of this. And when they go, they learn they don't have to bring a payment. Of course, that young colt would be quite valuable. There is a lifetime of work and transportation in that animal, and somebody has to be recompensed for all the work that has gone into it already. But the colt is released as if by sovereign command, handed over to the

disciples: “The Lord needs it.” With that word, the colt is released. They take it and go to find Jesus, and then this little crowd appears out of nowhere and things begin to unfold.

Now of course we know that Zechariah stands in the background of this, and Matthew makes it explicit: this is the fulfillment of prophecy. So we can attribute these offstage directions, this strange movement in the early part of the text, to the fulfillment of prophecy: God has arranged things so that the prophecy in Zechariah will be fulfilled and Jesus will enter, manifested as the one who fulfills it.

So there is something more happening. God enters subtly, quietly, and I think that’s what is really interesting about this text: it is all *sub contrario*, under the sign of the opposite. And that’s Mark, of course, who is always playing with the secret in one way or another. You could only anticipate it. The Gospel of Mark tells us these great and delicious stories of all that Jesus accomplishes and then has him say, “Don’t tell anyone.” You can just guess that Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is going to follow the same form.

It is the fulfillment of prophecy. God is moving here to bring his Messiah into the world, to manifest his Messiah as Lord of all. But he moves on the back of a colt: not in the kind of cosmic drama Isaiah envisioned, but subtly, on the back of a colt, in the midst of a street demonstration, a bit of street theater, into the city of Jerusalem. It’s kind of uncanny. But it is just like Mark, and just like Elijah too, who hears God coming in a still, small voice.

This is God’s entrance. He does not appear, he does not enter, in such a way that we can take command of him and direct him to our most recent ethical or ecclesiastical goals. He enters under the sign of the opposite: in the midst of contrariness, in the midst of sorrow and loss, in the midst of this little group of people who have followed Jesus down from Galilee and attracted a few others. And there he is, coming to the temple, yawning, and going to sleep.

Well, we know what is going to follow. It is not going to be the Christmas season; it’s going to be Holy Week. But that, of course, is the center of everything: that God, instead of rending the heavens and coming down as Isaiah hoped, entered subtly and gently in the midst of abandonment and despair, and in that context revealed himself to be the one who is for others, God in the flesh, the one who blesses.

So I anticipate that in preaching these texts for Advent, the contrast between Isaiah’s desire for fireworks and Jesus’ answer to Isaiah, this gentle, subtle entrance, will give you something to

work with, so that you can sing a song of praise to Christ Jesus, the one born in the manger, who enters so quietly, so gently, so utterly graciously.

Questions and Answers

A comment that the world takes little notice, though “Jesus hides beneath every wreath and candy cane”: you can reject him, but you can’t ignore him.

Boy, is that ever the truth, Brian. The *sub contrario* is not weakness. It is a mask in which God protects us from himself. Roy Harrisville loves to quote that story of Kierkegaard: the great prince went courting a young maiden, and he dressed as a pauper so that she would love him rather than his riches. And so God comes in grace, so that we will love the grace and his goodness rather than his naked power.

An observation that the way we celebrate Palm Sunday is the negation of Good Friday.

That’s exactly right, Julie. We make the cross a kind of unfortunate reversal between the glory trip of Palm Sunday and Easter’s spectacular resolution of all things. But in Scripture the risen one is always the crucified one. That is Paul’s contention with the Corinthians, and that is Mark’s contention with us: Jesus comes to us as the crucified one, in the midst of hiddenness and contrariness, and it is just there that we see his glory.

A comment that he shows up incognito.

That’s exactly right, Brian. There is a small, quiet voice, and that of course is absolutely essential, because when we go through our reversals, the kind of thing Isaiah experienced, the kind of thing the psalmist contends against when he has been scorned and rejected, when we go through our own dark nights of the soul, oftentimes there is nothing and nobody. But there is the voice, and that voice takes various forms. Some years ago, when I was going through my own crucifixion, as I call it, my own loss, I thought the whole world had come to an end. One of my old students, who had the Holy Spirit, feathers and all, would call out of nowhere. It was just miraculous. The word was on the tip of his tongue, and just when I needed it the worst, my little cell phone would ring, and there he’d be. Of course I love him for it. It was the good Lord who sent a voice, even in the midst of the silence.

An observation that this text locates us under the sign of the cross as we enter Advent.

That's exactly it, Julie. This text locates us. It puts us under the sign of the cross as we enter Advent. I really doubt the liturgical saints are sophisticated enough theologically to have thought of that. Maybe they are; I don't know. But certainly that is the way to hear it: as grounding us in Advent under the crucifixion and the resurrection.

A comment connecting the text to the Heidelberg Disputation and the hidden God in Isaiah.

Yes, Luther loved that. Brian, you're cooking. This text anchors us in the reality where people live and where we live. If Jesus is going to come anyplace, it has got to be there, in the wilderness. We'll talk about that next week when we get back to the normal Advent texts. Maybe somebody will finally explain to me why this text has been placed this way, but we'll take it. It's fun.

God's peace to you, and a blessed Advent at the beginning of the year. We have an old LP of the services in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and we love to play it, because for us it is Advent. So we'll be listening to that. All the best. We'll see you next week.

SOURCE

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