

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

The Shadow of the Cross

Mark 11:1-11; Mark 8:27-34

March 29, 2026

I don't know about you, but I've always been a bit suspicious of parades. There is something about the crowd—something about the chaos, the noise, the frenzy, the disorderliness of it—that makes it hard to tell the truth from all the shouting. And where are they all going, anyway?

In six days, he'll be dead. But this morning, there is a parade. There is a donkey. There are children. There are branches and cloaks and a crowd pressed against the gates into Jerusalem shouting a word so ancient and so urgent it already knows where this road ends.

Hosanna. Don't get this wrong. It's not a greeting. It's not a cheer. It's a 911 call. *Save us. Now. Save us. We have been waiting so long.* And that crowd, they meant it with everything they had, and so do we. *Save us.* He will answer that prayer, just not the way any of us wanted.

Six days. The cross is already there, casting its shadow backward over the parade, over the branches, over the children, over the whole beautiful, desperate, chaotic mess. No, they can't see it yet, but this is the week the light shifts.

It's the eve of Passover. Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims, and Rome is watching it all. And the religious authorities are watching Rome watch it all. And here comes Jesus. Where is he going?

Well, he's done being careful. He rides into Jerusalem in a deliberate fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy—the king who comes not on a warhorse but on a donkey. Humble. Unarmed. Lowly he rides.

And the crowd goes wild. *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the kingdom of our ancestor David.*

David. That's who they want. They want to crown a conquering king. They want a lion. They get a lamb on a donkey. This Messiah they seek will break their hearts before he saves their souls.

Flashback. Weeks earlier, on the road, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered first. And he is right. "You, Jesus, are the Messiah."

But Jesus did not congratulate him. He shuts Peter down. And then he says what no one wants to hear. "The Messiah must suffer. The Messiah must be rejected...and killed."

What kind of parade is this? Peter wants none of it. He pulls Jesus aside. "No, no, Jesus. That's not how this works. Messiahs don't get killed. They slay"

And Jesus turns on him with the sharpest words he ever speaks. "Get behind me, Satan."

You see, Peter has the right word and the wrong definition. Peter wants a Messiah too strong to suffer, but Jesus will show him a love strong enough to die. Peter spends the next three weeks trying to steer Jesus away from the cross—until Thursday night.

Thursday night, Jesus is inside being interrogated, and Peter is outside in the courtyard. He's warming himself at a fire, and a stranger looks at him across the flames and asks, "Aren't you one of them? You were with him, weren't you?"

"Who, me? I don't know what you are talking about." Three times. Before the rooster crows.

You see, Peter is us. Peter is us every time we choose silence over solidarity. Peter is us every time we warm

ourselves at the fires of comfort while the vulnerable are handed over. Peter is us every time we look away. *I do not know this man!*

You see, this week, you are not only in the crowd that shouts Hosanna. You are in the courtyard, warming your hands, hoping no one looks too closely, ready to deny the one you promised to follow all the way to the end.

Watch the religious authorities in this story. They are not cartoon villains. They are leaders who have made a carefully calculated accommodation with Rome to survive. They give Caesar what Caesar demands. They protect the temple. They keep the peace. And what choice do they have? Rome executes resisters. So, they make a bargain.

But compromises have a way of shaping our convictions. Perhaps you've noticed. Each one comes a little easier than the last. And soon the courage is gone, surrendered to appease those who control the crosses.

This is not ancient history. Every generation must decide the cost of discipleship. Today we see the same surrender, its monstrous effects. Religious leaders who betray the Gospel of the crucified Christ to become chaplains to power. Scripture wielded not as holy word but a harmful weapon. The name of Jesus invoked to target the very people he drew closest—the hungry child, the sick, the refugee, the one with nowhere to lay her head. The faith that sets captives free used to justify captivity. For shame.

You see, whenever the church marries power, it's always power that calls the shots. If you grieve this twisting of gospel truth to fit the demands of power, you are not losing your faith. You are on the way to finding it. The church has always been renewed by those who love Jesus too much to let his name be stolen.

You cannot conscript the crucified Christ. God will not be mocked.

Where is he going? A Roman cross. They designed it to be slow, public, humiliating. They stripped him, pressed down a crown of thorns, nailed his wrists and feet to the wood, and lifted him up where everyone could see

the spectacle. Crucifixion kills by suffocation. You push yourself up to breathe until you can no longer push.

We built that cross. Out of fear. Out of the need to control. Our lust for power. Our addiction to brutality. We built that cross.

But he would not turn aside. He would not accept power on our terms. The cross is humanity's most damning act of violence. The cross is God's most radical act of love. Our cruelty put him there. And God said: *I would rather die than abandon you. I would rather lose everything than win your way.*

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann was conscripted as a German soldier at age sixteen and taken prisoner at the end of World War II. He spent months surrounded by devastation so complete it seemed to preclude the existence of God entirely.

Instead, he came out of it with this conviction that shaped his life: *only the suffering God can help us.* Only the suffering God. Not the God who watches from a balcony. Not the God who rewards displays of power. A God who enters the darkness all the way to its depths. And stays. This is the God of the cross.

Some of you know my friend Sarah Brouwer. Former Lake Fellow. Pastor in Minneapolis. This winter she watched fear take up residence in her city. The kind that changes how people move through their days, that asks everyone to decide what kind of neighbor they are willing to be. She watched her community rise to answer that question. In the middle of it she wrote these words: *Sometimes I think Jesus became the Messiah because he was the only one who could not look away.* The only one who couldn't look away. I've read those words a hundred times.

It seems to me there are two kinds of faith. One reaches up for power, seeks the Messiah who conquers, the God who blesses our warring madness, the muscle-bound Jesus itching for a fight.

The other kind of faith reaches out toward the neighbor, toward the stranger, toward the suffering, the God who chose sacrificial love.

When I read this story, I notice that while everyone else was looking for a king, Jesus had his eyes set on the cross. He could not look away. I have seen that kind of faith. I've seen it here at Second Church.

A couple of weeks ago, I saw it in two children standing at that lectern, at their grandmother's funeral, where together they read scripture in voices that were not quite steady. But they didn't look away.

I saw it in a saint who said what saints say when they've made their peace. "Chris, I've had a blessed life. I'm tired now. I'm ready for what comes next." No fear. Just faith in a God who stays.

When word spread that their friend had cancer, nobody asked what to do—they just started doing it. Organizing support, showing up. The love of God arriving in takeout containers and space for tears to flow. They didn't look away.

I see it in a thousand small acts of faith lived out in parking lots and pews and text threads and kitchen tables—families finding their way home, one relationship at a time.

And you, this congregation, hungry for the real thing and finding it. I know this because you tell me. Week after week, something lands, something opens, and you write me to say, "Keep telling the hard truth. We can take it. We need it." That is a congregation that has found its faith not in the comfortable, but in the costly.

You can keep that God crafted in the image of a tyrant's dream. You can keep that leader hellbent on crushing the weak to look strong. You can keep the church so intoxicated by power it abandons its mission. And I will keep preaching this truth: that only the suffering God can help us. That only the suffering God will stay.

On that Roman cross, the crucified one took on the worst that we can do, and he looked on us with eyes of love. That's the God I know. That's the God I worship. That's the God to whom I give my life.

Yesterday, Sara and our boys rode out to Lebanon with Dick Kruse to pick up Enright. That's our beloved

donkey. And believe it or not, she spent last night at our house. *At* our house, not *in* our house. In the afternoon, Sara and Enright went for a walk around the neighborhood. Quite a scene in Carmel. As word spread there was a donkey on the sidewalk, children from every house in the neighborhood came running out. Adults peeked out their windows, maybe took a step onto the porch. The children gathered, and Sara asked them why they thought Jesus chose a donkey. One of our neighbors—eight years old—patted Enright's back and said: "If he wanted to get away fast, he would choose a horse. But, if he wanted to stay, he would choose a donkey." The gospel according to Liam.

The parade ends here. Not in triumph, but in death's shadow. And so, you came in here waving palms, but you will leave carrying something much heavier. Do not look away. Do not trust those whose god is power.

He chose the donkey. He chose the cross. His eyes on you. He did not look away. He stayed. For you.

Hosanna. Save us. Stay close.

He will.