

# Story and Meditation: Step by Step

March 28, 2021

Mark 11:1-11

*by Eric Anderson*

It was still nest-building season, but mercifully there are no big storms in this week's story. This week it's all about building nests. Lots of the 'apapane in the ohi'a and koa forest were industriously building nests.

One father-to-be was dashing madly about through the trees looking for material here, there, and everywhere. There's some moss. There's some more moss. Oh, how about these grasses? And these bits of bark?

Back to the nest site he'd fly as fast as could, shove the new things hurriedly into the old things, and then he'd buzz off again.

The other 'apapane – and his own wife, for that matter – watched all this with some amazement.

He kept picking up all sorts of material. He'd pick up one thing, then spot another better thing. Instead of putting down the first thing, he'd carry both things, and sometimes even try to add a third or a fourth thing. When you've only one beak and a couple of feet to carry things – and you have to land on your feet – carrying even one thing is sometimes too much of a thing.

As a result, his zooming flights through the forest could be mapped on the ground below by the things he'd dropped along the way.

At the nest, things weren't a lot better. Instead of carefully choosing a spot for the twig, or moss, or bit of lichen, he'd just shove it in somewhere before leaping off to do it all again. Sometimes this resulted in other well-placed bits of nest suddenly cascading to the forest floor. He didn't notice. He was already on the wing.

On one of his trips to the nest, he found a familiar red and black figure perched there. He hardly glanced at her, though, as he started to shove a leaf in. She stepped in the way, however, and he had to stop. It was his mother, of course.

"What are you doing, son?"

"I'm building a nest, Mom."

"Are you? Is that what you're doing? Take another look."

“I don’t have time for this, Mom.”

“You have plenty of time for this. Look closely at what you’ve been doing.”

So he did. And when he did, he was puzzled. For all the flying he’d been doing and all the things he’d gathered, there was remarkably little nest taking shape, and the shape of the nest was... not a good shape. Where it was a good shape, he didn’t recognize any of the bits and pieces he’d collected, which was because he hadn’t placed them there. His wife had.

Looking down, he saw the sad little piles of things that had fallen from his hasty and careless “construction” and the little lines of things that marked his madcap flights through the forest.

“Oh,” he said.

“Oh,” she said in return. “Take your time, son. It’s better to do it slower and carefully than faster and carelessly. Among other things, fast and careless gets you nothing at all.”

She flew off to her own nest. His wife settled next to him for a moment. He nodded. She nodded.

Then they got back to work, slowly and carefully, to build their nest.

There’s a curious accident of transliteration, translation, and story-telling over the years that has transformed our understanding of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

The crowd that gathered was quoting Psalm 118:26 –that same Psalm inspired our Call to Worship and Prayer of Invocation today – “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.” Psalm 118 seems to have had a place in the thanksgiving rituals of the Jerusalem temple. Those words had probably been sung when victorious monarchs and generals had returned to the temple hundreds of years before to celebrate the successful end of their wars. It could also have been sung to rejoice in other kinds of saving events: the end of a drought, or an infestation of crop-destroying insects, or... a pandemic.

The crowd also quoted Psalm 118:24, rendered “Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!” in the NRSV and rather more pointedly, “O LORD, do help! O LORD, let it prosper!” by Hans-Joachim Kraus in his commentary on the Psalms. The Hebrew reads “Annah Adonai howoshia na,” – you can probably hear how “howoshia na” became “Hosannah” when Mark set it down in a Greek alphabet. Curiously, Mark didn’t translate that part in Greek. He translated the rest of the verse, but he left just the sound of the Hebrew cry for help, a cry which we have generally misunderstood to be a shout of praise in our time.

“Save us! Help us!” That’s what at least some in the crowd called out to Jesus. That’s what they called out to God.

Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org, “The part of the crowd who cried out ‘Hosanna!’ were looking for a miracle... That part of the crowd rendered unto Caesar what was Caesar’s and looked to Jesus for a new kin-dom. Their cries came from a people whose lives were in peril—there’s no other reason to ask to be saved. ‘Hosanna!’ isn’t a cheer; it’s a declaration of an emergency expressed as praise toward the God who hears, cares, and responds.”

“Save us! Help us!”

Jesus, in the meantime, rode up the city streets toward the temple at the summit of the hill on a colt, a smallish equine animal, perhaps a donkey, perhaps just a young horse, and Mark doesn’t record him saying anything at all in response.

Step by step, he rode along the ascending streets.

The more Biblically literate in the crowd may have recognized that, too. It’s a reference to the ninth chapter of Zechariah, which includes the words:

“Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

There were other prophets who wrote of kings entering the city. Jeremiah wrote of kings entering on chariots and horses. Part of the glory of Solomon’s reign was the fourteen hundred chariots in his army. Jesus might have tried to emulate one of those ancient monarchs – I grant you that a chariot might have been hard to find in a village along the road to Jerusalem, but if they could find a colt, they could find a horse. I can just imagine Jesus’ disciples arguing with him:

“A colt? Really? Wouldn’t you rather have a horse? Everybody can see you on a horse. Everybody will be impressed by you on a horse. Seriously, Jesus: Let us get you a horse.”

Step by step, Jesus rode a colt up those streets.

Jesus’ ministry over the previous three years had been one of healing, preaching, and teaching. It had not been one of majestic authority. Entering Jerusalem, Jesus refused to change it to what some wanted, many expected, and quite a number feared. He had already acknowledged the title “Messiah” among his closest followers, but he did not proclaim it to a wider group beyond that. It was because Jesus refused to let people misunderstand – and they would have misunderstood – what a Messiah would do and the kind of deliverance he would bring.

We still want to misunderstand.

Jesus exercised his royal power not in conquest or in grandeur. He exercised it in healing, reconciliation, and renewal. He did not lead the violent revolution many anticipated. He sought to lead a revolution of compassion and courage. He did not assert power to prevent death. He asserted power to set aside the power of death itself.

Step by step.

Jesus might have turned aside. This event began the last five days of Jesus' earthly life. The next day, returning to the city, Jesus scattered the animal vendors and money changers in the Temple. It's that action, said Mark, that fanned the fear of the chief priests into a plot to arrest Jesus. I have no doubt that their fear was also fed by the shouts of "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David" – a line that the crowd did not quote from Psalm 118.

So Jesus might have seen the crowd, heard the shouts, and turned aside. He might have sought a quieter visit to the Temple. He might have abandoned the idea of spending Passover in Jerusalem. He knew the risks. He'd spoken of them to his friends.

If he was to heal and preach and teach, he had to hear the calls for aid. If he was to heal and preach and teach, he had to be hailed as Messiah and monarch. If he was to heal and preach and teach, he had to cleanse the Temple. If he was to heal and preach and teach, he was going to frighten the religious authorities enough to get him arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified.

And that is just what he did. He followed the road, step by step, riding humbly on a colt, secure in the course he had set, knowing that a cross awaited, knowing that his power to heal and preach and teach must not be deterred by that cross, knowing that his power to heal and preach and teach would only be magnified by that cross.

As we enter this Holy Week, let yourself sense the wonder of it all. Let yourself consider the other paths Jesus might have followed, and what might have happened if he did. Let yourself consider the love which carried him along the road he chose, step by step: and the wonders he accomplished because he followed that road to its end – and beyond.

Amen.