

Pontius Pilate, expecting he would keep the peace through a show of military force. The disciples wanted Jesus to be their champion, they just weren't sure what his victory would look like.

We watch as Jesus marches into Jerusalem on a thrilling and unpredictable ride. Every opponent he faces is going to test him and try to defeat him. In this single-elimination tournament, there are no do-overs and no second chances. We hope that Jesus will cut through the chaos and emerge as the champion. But what kind of winner do we want him to be? And what kind of champion does God want him to be?

Jesus was a team player, not a ball hog. Mark tells us that when Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, Jesus sent two of them ahead to find a colt. He said that if anyone questioned them, they were to say, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately" (vv. 1-3). "The Lord needs it." It's a surprising admission. Jesus needed a stranger to provide him with an animal so that he could make his march into the city. You wouldn't think that the all-powerful Son of God would need anything, but Mark reveals that he did. He needed a colt and a cooperative animal owner. Jesus would not enter Jerusalem under his own power, beating his chest and calling attention to himself, but quietly and humbly, riding on a donkey. In basketball language, you would say that Jesus was a team player, not a ball hog.

So, what does the Lord need *from us*? Probably not a colt. But how about our time, our efforts and our talents? David Brooks, a columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote, "About once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued...They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all."

Such people, says Brooks, have generosity of spirit and depth of character. They are people who say "yes" when Jesus asks them to contribute their time and effort and talent. They don't think about themselves as much as they think about what they can do for others, and because of this they are outstanding teammates for Jesus.

Jesus accepted his role as a leader. Of course, every successful team needs a leader, and Jesus did not resist playing the part. Mark tells us that many people in the crowd

spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. All around him, people shouted: "*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!*" (vv. 8-10).

In Old Testament times, people spread their cloaks on the road for a king to walk on (2 Kings 9:13). The shouts of the crowd were clearly intended to identify Jesus as their king, the son of David. Jesus did not shy away from this role: he embraced it. He entered Jerusalem as a leader, a king.

But what kind of a leader is he? Pastor Ron Edmondson says that Jesus is a leader who invests himself in people that others would have dismissed: a fisherman named Peter, a tax collector named Matthew, a woman named Mary who had seven demons cast out of her. People like us with feet of clay and real problems in life. Jesus practices servant leadership, most visibly when he washes the feet of his disciples on the night of the Last Supper. And Jesus shares responsibility with others in a succession plan, telling his followers that they will have to carry on his work after he is no longer with them.

Jesus is a leader who invests in people, serves them and entrusts them with his work. He is a true champion because he looks beyond his own achievements to the continued success of his ministry and mission.

Jesus was clear about what success looks like. As the week progressed, Jesus willingly suffered betrayal and arrest. He silently stood before the Jewish council and he uttered no word of protest when Pontius Pilate ordered his crucifixion. Jesus knew that the earthly powers, those who opposed him, were hell-bent on eliminating him from contention.

We struggle with this Jesus, so meek and mild, who accepts his fate at the hands of others. We expect champions to be victorious, happy, successful, and influential. We wear their jerseys because we want to feel like winners, and when they suffer defeats we tend to become fans of other players. But Jesus is a champion who trusts God through a week of defeats, walking faithfully to the cross, and he invites us to pick up our crosses and follow him. This doesn't make us feel like winners, except in our relationship with God.

Jerusalem March Madness

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Mark 11:1-11

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jerusalem March Madness ends with the chaos of the cross. There was no winning shot at the buzzer; instead, Jesus gives a loud cry, takes his last breath, and dies. But in a surprising turnaround, a Roman centurion looks up at him and says, "*Truly this man was God's Son!*" (15:39). No one saw that coming. An officer in the Roman Empire - the opposing team - sees that Jesus is the true champion. He identifies Jesus as the Son of God, victorious in his faithfulness to God. Jesus knows that trusting God is true success, and then the Roman centurion discovers the very same.

With his death, Jesus achieves victory. He demonstrates just how far he will go to show us the endless, unconditional and saving love of God. And his success changes the heart of a Roman soldier.

Our hearts can be changed as well. When we march with Jesus through Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we can listen for what the Lord needs from us, and we can respond. We can look to Jesus as our leader and be part of his succession plan for ongoing ministry and mission. And we can stand at the foot of the cross, looking up to see success instead of defeat.

Truly this man is God's Son. Champion of all time, worldwide winner. Not a Cinderella, but a Savior. As we root for him, we can trust God in the same way that he did, through all the madness of life.

Prayer: We praise you, O God, for your redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. He entered the holy city of Jerusalem in triumph and was proclaimed Messiah and king by those who spread garments and branches along his way. Just as we carry these branches, may we follow Christ in the way of the cross that, dying and rising with him, we may enter into your kingdom; through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Sources:

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- Patterson, Chip. "NCAA Tournament: Ranking the 25 best March Madness Cinderella stories." cbssports.com, March 9, 2017.

I want you to think back to March 1983. That's the year the North Carolina State Wolfpack basketball team created quite a buzz by squeaking into the NCAA tournament. These players and their young coach starred in the greatest Cinderella story in the history of college basketball. At the beginning of the month, no one paid much attention to the Wolfpack. But coach Jim Valvano and his team steadily marched through the brackets beating Pepperdine, UNLV, Utah and the powerful Virginia Cavaliers. As the team gathered momentum, fans greeted the team like rock stars, and pep rallies around N.C. State became legendary.

When the Wolfpack reached the title game, it looked like the end of the road. They faced a star-studded Houston team including Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler. But when the players took the court, they produced one of the greatest basketball games of all time, ending in a stunning final sequence. The Wolfpack's Dereck Whittenburg threw a 30-foot air ball, which Lorenzo Charles slammed home for an N.C. State victory.

Video of Jim Valvano sprinting around the court, looking for someone to hug, is still played every year on television. Nothing says "March Madness" like this moment from the 1983 national championship 35 years ago. Everybody loves it when the underdogs win! It inspires us, reminding us that anything is possible. I mention this now because our country is once again mired in March madness!

Now, take the image of the champions joyously racing out to center court when the final buzzer sounds and place it in Jerusalem around the year 33 A.D. Buzz is building as thousands of Jews gather to celebrate the Passover in the holy city. A march is staged by Jesus and his disciples, and before you know it: madness! March madness.

Just as basketball fans make their bracket picks and try to guess who will make it to the Final Four, residents of Jerusalem struggled to figure out which of the local powers would come out on top. Some of the locals bet on a new ruler, a conquering hero, who would establish the kingdom of their ancestor David (v. 10). Others wagered that a religious leader such as the high priest would prevail. The Romans backed their political appointee