
Parade as Protest: Engaging Mark's Palm Sunday Narrative as Call to Contemporary Christian Advocacy

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When they first walked into our “downtown in a small town” UCC church in central Pennsylvania, Isaiah was all the scrawny, jagged haircut and awkward swagger that I had come to expect as foster-care-teen standard issue. I was only in my second call as a congregational pastor, but I had moved to central Pennsylvania a handful of years earlier to be a therapeutic foster parent. Being a foster parent was actually a calling I knew more about than being a pastor at that point.

Of all the callings I thus far thought I could easily partner with the Holy Spirit to do, having the great wisdom and experience of a cocky Baltimore social worker who'd seen it all, supporting my 15-year-old niece through the throes of adolescence contained by far the most humbling and soul-wrenching challenges. The shattering truths I learned being the steward of a real live human's safety, basic nutrition, and mental health were a hefty contributor to my returning to the church. No, teenagers don't “practically raise themselves at that point.” They also don't magically leave home, fully self-sufficient, at 18 when your work is completed according to state policy. I thanked the God of my understanding daily for the love of a congregation who wrapped around me with shared experience, compassionate patience, and meal prep tips for picky eaters that helped me survive this first foray into mom-hood, even on days I still struggled to cross a sanctuary threshold.

The congregation I was now the pastor of thrived in its small and mighty way just outside the boundaries of what locals and enthusiastic tourists call “Amish Country”. I knew little more about York, Pennsylvania, than Peppermint Patties and what two stoplights of quaint storefronts looked like while driving through. I had moved there to be Leigh's caregiver over a holiday weekend with little more than a sight unseen Craigslist rental and a fingers-crossed prayer. I had been outside of the church for more than 10 years when fate upended this carefree tumbleweed of an urban girl into a “city” of 5.3 square miles without a single museum and more farm markets than dance clubs. A young woman I loved needed me, though. A kid I cared about, saw the inherent worth in no matter her behavior or acting out, and an unwieldy balm to my childless heart with little family who would claim me or vice versa. I believed Leigh deserved the best start in a world I already knew to be harsh, frequently unwelcoming, and too often unforgiving

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of those striving to find their way. I had been the only number stored in her cell phone the night the police officers picked Leigh up to answer the call. I was the one who showed up with clean underwear and “black girl-friendly conditioner” during visiting hours at the foster home. Now, I was the one signing on a dotted line to say that somehow, we were going to make it to a high school diploma and the age of 18, together. And, as bills and homecoming dresses and therapy co-pays came due, I went where those bills could be paid, including a request for the new poet in town to visit a progressive church deemed “the hippy church,” “the progressive church,” or, with dramatic inflection, “the gay church.”

When I approached the white stone façade of the only slightly crumbling historic building with wide flung doors and a rainbow of light splashing across the sidewalk through a high set rose window, the first thing I noticed was a well-worn banner lifting slightly in the breeze. One corner had come detached from its stone-drilled anchors thanks to a missing metal ring, the fabric frayed upon every edge. The banner said “welcome.” In rainbow colors. On a background of rainbow colors. That sun-faded, rain-battered sign somehow told me that no matter who I loved, how I dressed, or

where I was from, I was welcome. Its very lack of performative sparkle and well-loved state of wear told me this was not a special event signifier making a rare seasonal appearance. This banner hung outside this place, clearly visible from passing cars, from nearby bus stops and the sidewalk-facing snack counters. This banner had been dangling from an embedded hook long enough for the neighborhood to pass it by with barely a glance, it having faded into the disregard of familiarity.

Because of that banner, because of the Holy Spirit working through that banner in *my* spirit, I was able to cross the flagstone threshold to meet their current “artsy” pastor who leaned into the branding of being “a storytelling church” so much as to offer fair compensation for a commissioned piece from a local poet, should they be willing to read it in a worship service. For me, that was a landmark moment because I’m a survivor of a practice called conversion therapy, and walking without trembling knees across a congregational threshold, without a tight and wrenching chest and an uncertain belly hadn’t happened in nearly a decade.

What I experienced after telling my Bible study leader that I had fallen head-over-heels for my college teaching assistant in the impulsively taken Judo class that fulfilled a proudly proclaimed literature nerd’s physical education requirement is more than needs to be described in this space or spread like tar across the skin of these pages. I’ll only say that Mei was the first out lesbian I had ever met, voluntary exile from a small town on the fringes of Detroit, Michigan. The feelings I had for her were one of the few things strong enough to lift me off the chilled tile of a bathroom floor, where I’d wept beneath an icy shower for moments I never did gather myself enough to count. Strong enough for me to leave the childhood Christian denomination that had been my safe place when family wasn’t able to be that. Strong enough to let me sleep in restless fits when the flashbacks receded. It was not until this day though that the me I found when I walked out from those doors and didn’t stop until I made it to a dust-covered truck stop with a blessedly working pay phone was strong enough to come to the steps of a church and keep going.

Over the years, an old adage about every soul having a God-sized peace missing would whisper into my soul. I had even visited a few events and storefront communities that promised safety and acceptance to a multiracial black lesbian. My own fear and the persistent echoes of now deeply debated and frequently contested translations of cultural Greek words which found their way into “thee” and “thou” translations of the Bible were still nested comfortably in my internalized beliefs that no faith community would welcome me beyond my donations, my presence in a soulful choir, or my quiet assimilation at best. Could God truly love or want or work through someone like me? A timeless ache rumbled in the cavern of my chest from time to time, when the soaring arc of a long-held vibrato note would slip through a cracked open stained-glass window on a neighborhood Sunday morning. My own disbelief kept me from returning. More than a handful of times. This blustery day, wrapped in the beauty of dying leaves releasing from resting trees in gentle surrender, I begin

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to understand that acceptance could be absorbed into authentic welcome, even celebration.

Worship in this place was an accessible style of plain and straightforward storytelling. The sanctuary was a story made real, Autumn trees of paper and cardboard, wind made of floating scarves and ceiling fans. Questions were welcomed and bubbled up from a lively and laughing audience, even challenges to seemingly impossible stories and difficult parts of scripture. Rather than flowery language and Latin-tinted phrasing, I heard the Gospel in the language that I spoke. A voice cried in the wilderness, and a Messiah appeared. Not a savior because of the ancient prophecies he fulfilled, his wildly impressive lineage and confirmation as descendant of patriarchs whose names I barely remembered from Vacation Bible School stories. Not to be honored in homage to cultural relevance I grasped only distantly through a haze of prophecy and gilded scroll foretelling, but to be stood before in stark awe because God tore the heavens open and poured peace over his head and said the words I have been longing for God to say to me for a decade, “This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Although I had come only to share a poem, a novel answer to the customary Psalm reading, I was gripped and began diving into these Gospels.

Fragments of life began to spark within me, the way flint draws forth fire against hard stone. Only later would I understand why.

The worship in that congregation was the worship I experienced in the Gospel of Mark. Not simply because it happened to be a Mark year in the lectionary. It was something deeper than that. The rhythm of the place felt like Mark. Worship wasn't an escape from the world but preparation to enter it more fully. Stories mattered more than polished answers. Questions were welcomed instead of feared. Faith wasn't measured by certainty of procedure, but by what happened after we left the sanctuary doors and encountered the wilderness of the world and the people in it with the certainty of identity and calling.

I had been raised on Matthew. Matthew's Jesus was the teacher. The lecturer. The fulfillment of prophecy. Every story fit carefully into God's larger story. Genealogies mattered. Ancient promises were fulfilled. The Sermon on the Mount unfolded with deliberate beauty and impossible challenge. I admired Matthew's Jesus. But somewhere along the way, Matthew became the Gospel through which I inherited obligation.

Whether that came from Matthew himself or from the churches that taught him, I cannot entirely say. What I know is that discipleship became synonymous with trying harder. Holiness seemed like something achieved through greater discipline, greater certainty, greater obedience. Every sermon left me wondering whether I was measuring up. I wasn't searching for an easier Gospel. I was searching for one that could recognize the life I was already living; a life shaped by questions. A life shaped by responsibility. A life shaped by justice. A life that refused to fit neatly inside other people's expectations.

Then there was John. I have come to love John's poetry. Even now, "The Word became flesh" catches my breath. John's language stretches beyond explanation into mystery, and I treasure that. But that wasn't how I first encountered John's Gospel. I encountered John through debate. Through people who always seemed to possess a cherry-picked answer for every question and a verse for every argument. John's Gospel became the place where my humanity seemed to come under examination. My life as a woman. As a lover. As someone whose questions were born from lived experience rather than academic study.

The Jesus of John never had panic attacks. At least, not the Jesus I inherited. He never seemed to lose sleep over whether he belonged. Never wondered if his body made him suspect. Never questioned whether there was room for him inside the community he loved. Real people did. The teenagers I worked with did. Parents trying to hold fractured families together did. Survivors did. As their advocate and accompanying presence, I did. I wasn't looking for a Jesus who floated above the humanity my work was steeped in.

Luke stirred something different in me. I wanted Luke to be true. I wanted tables to be that open. I wanted women welcomed without qualification. I wanted outsiders embraced without suspicion. I wanted the poor, the forgotten, and the marginalized to become the center of the story rather than its footnotes. Luke painted a beautiful world where mercy interrupted judgment, where grace consistently surprised people. It was beautiful. But

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experience had taught me that institutions often proclaim inclusion long before they practice it. I trusted actions more than promises because my whole life had taught me that belonging usually came with conditions.

When you are born black and raised by a white, lapsed Jewish mother with significant mental health challenges, estranged from her family and fallen into poverty, you learn early that identity is something other people often explain back to you before they've ever asked your story. I belonged everywhere. I belonged nowhere. Then I became a woman. Not the quiet kind. Not the decorative kind. Not the kind willing to confuse submission with holiness. Life had taught me that strength wasn't optional. It was survival.

Then I fell in love with women. Almost overnight, my existence became controversial to people who had never met me. The very children I had dedicated my professional life to protecting were often invoked as the reason people like me should remain invisible. By then I had already spent years as a social worker. I knew neighborhoods. I knew systems. I knew bureaucracy. I knew what happened when policies forgot people. Most of all, I knew how to fight for those whose voices carried the least weight. Conflict was a language I understood. Not because I loved conflict, but because love sometimes requires confrontation. Then I met Mark.

Mark's Jesus spoke my native language. My social worker turned community organizer and diversity educator with a splash of poet language. He moved. Immediately. Again and again, that word appears. Immediately. Jesus walked. Jesus healed. Jesus confronted. Jesus crossed boundaries. He gathered ordinary people and trusted them with extraordinary work. He didn't confuse contemplation with inaction. He entered neighborhoods where suffering had become ordinary. He challenged religious leaders when religion protected power instead of people. He named empire because empire had names, policies, victims, and consequences.

Rome wasn't scenery, wasn't "politics," wasn't a topic to be

avoided at family dinners. Rome shaped every conversation. Every empty table. Every frightened family. Every exhausted worker. Jesus refused to pretend they existed only as cautionary tales as color for illustrative metaphor. As a social worker, I recognized that instinct immediately. You cannot heal individuals while pretending the structures surrounding them are irrelevant.

Long before I understood my own neurodivergence, my mind already resonated with Mark's pace. Reflection had become a safety practice. Prayer that became presence. Hope that became action. The same as my lists and handwritten paper calendars and the small notebook I always kept in my purse or pocket for ideas and necessities that could too easily slip into the ether of my mind without cues to focus, to regulate, to integrate into a day that struggled for structure. The congregation embodied that same rhythm. No one asked me to leave my activism outside the sanctuary. No one suggested my concern for justice distracted from the Gospel. No one implied that poetry belonged somewhere separate from theology or that organizing communities somehow competed with discipleship.

Instead, I discovered something I had never imagined. These were not separate callings; me as the social worker, myself as the poet. The human and the organizer. The foster parent and the pastor I was only beginning to imagine becoming. They could all be gathered into one vocation that was recognition, not fruitful training into complacent obedience turned product. The welcome offered from those pews wasn't simply hospitality. It was recognition.

The people in that congregation saw gifts I had spent years developing beyond church walls and quietly suggested that perhaps the Holy Spirit had been present there all along. Following Jesus wasn't an escape from the work I already loved. It was an invitation to understand that work as ministry. Advocacy was discipleship. Storytelling was proclamation. Community organizing was an expression of the Kingdom of God. Justice was worship. By the time I realized what was happening, I had stopped asking whether there was room for me inside the Church. The more compelling question had become what kind of Church Mark's Jesus was still calling into being. I had walked into that sanctuary believing I had come to read a poem. By the time I walked into a Bishop's office to discover the next steps in my journey, I was carrying a Gospel but living it would, of course, become the real challenge and the call.

What I heard from the lectern that first Sunday was enough to bring me back and then bring me back again, to dabble on the edges of community life as a poet and fundraiser, volunteer and always, avid listener. Most likely detecting the potentially successful lure of a wayward sheep, I was invited to write and perform poems, now as responses or windows into scripture. Poetry became my first sermon—Ahem—“guest speaker gig.” Then a series of invitations to ruminations around scripture passages and what they called us into as people just trying to find a way to survive together in a small city, in a wobbly job market bracketed with rising rent and disgust-spiking news headlines.

I was not yet ready to wrestle with the passages in Leviticus

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or the road-side journal scratchings of Paul that had been so destructively weaponized against me. Before I went toe-to-toe in the ring with his followers, I needed to look into the eyes of Jesus and know—know for sure. Was there even a place for me in a conversation about Jesus' love? I'd been too deeply steeped in the soil of scripture as a child to deny the reality of Jesus, but that only made more tree-trunk splitting, the lightning strike of being told that I was outside of God's love. There could be no Jacob wrestling with an angel or road to Damascus light show until I knew whether or not Jesus wanted me to hold the book in my hand that I had been told spelled both life and death.

In the world of diversity and equity, advocacy and community organizing, we teach that all healing starts with relationship. To move from transactional check boxes to transformational community change, we need to go to the source of recognizing the human being next to us or across from us as another human being, deserving the same rights and love and grace that we might seek for ourselves. For me, that meant healing of spiritual trauma needed to start with the Gospels. In a time of Black Lives Matter and #metoo, and police violence and children in cages, in a time when every marginalized aspect of me knew nothing but to fight, I needed to know whether it was safe to let down my guard enough to open both mind and heart and let the creativity of reinvention flow. Into that slight crack of a window, it was Mark that spoke uniquely, and clearly into my soul.

When I finally surrendered to the inevitability of a pastoral call, one of the questions I was asked by the “grilling panel” of a dozen white, silver-haired, lifelong European Protestant great-grandchildren of Uncle Jedediah who had donated the land the original church was built on (yes, I said that in my head enough that it still rolls off my tongue in sardonic jest many years later) was “What's your favorite biblical passage about Jesus? How did you learn to understand who Jesus is to you and what following in the path of Jesus can give to the world?” My answer was swift and

confident. "Jesus flipping tables in the temple." I was genuinely shocked at the wide eyes and skyrocketing eyebrows that greeted my reply followed by an eventual stammered, "No one has ever said that one before."

What? No sooner is Jesus named and called by God than he's driven into the wilderness. Satan is coming at him on all sides. Not because he isn't loved, not because he isn't God, but because that's how the world comes at you when you dare to be different. Angels had Jesus' back though. He lasted longer than anyone should have. Longer than anyone without Holy Spirit protection could have. He lasted long enough to truly know what he was made of, so that he could walk into a den of thieves and not be shaken. In that confidence, in that strength, he was able to keep right on doing the impossible. Working miracles, even when people told him not to. Not in this space, not on this day. But Jesus didn't need society's approval. He came to flip the old ways of power on their heads, not to beg admission to their performative circus. Even his own family turned on him. Called him out of his mind. Told him to fall in line. He was the prophet without honor in his own hometown. But you can't shut down or bully a person who no longer questions his own validity, who doesn't have to look outside of his own heart for answers, for validation. Didn't you read what he said to them? "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." Jesus was a man united where it truly mattered, inside himself and his own heart.

Jesus also refused to hide. Like the light under the bushel basket. He refused to dim his light to keep other people comfortable, because comfort doesn't bring the change that heals broken systems and opens closed minds. Only authenticity shifts bias, changes hearts. And it doesn't matter what we have always done, because what we have always done is to fight the same battles and try to change the same laws and argue about who deserves freedom, who deserves rights, over and over and over again. Across religions and countries and skin colors and language lines. But doesn't Jesus say flat out that "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition?" All I keep reading is God telling people to love one another and Jesus touching person after person, bleeding woman after disabled person after outsider after outsider, and saying "So, are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile. Jesus says, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. The things within a hating, evil heart. That's the only about a person worth getting mad at!"

Having run, at an unabashedly admitted ranting speed, through the reclaiming I was still embodying with the zeal of the newly converted, fresh off a Book of Mark Bible Study, it most likely would have behooved me to stop there but the room remained silent. The panel of judgement in the body of judges had shifted in some way. Several were leaning back in their chairs, their elbows no longer on the table. One had just a single eyebrow raised, but what hinted at a slight ghost of a smile quirked the

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corner of his mouth. I wasn't sure what to make of their continued quiet, but I also hadn't realized I was the only one no longer in a rolling desk chair, but on my feet before the glossy oak of a conference table. Twisting the silver band with a cross I wore on my right ring finger in agitated circles, I slowly sat, scanned the room with wary eyes, then spoke—softer now—into the silence.

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My eyes darted between the brows of minds I couldn't discern, but I had spoken all the Jesus I knew. I had given my voice over to the Jesus I had found in myself, had begun to share with others on the fringes, lost like I had been. With a slight nod, I was escorted from the room. The average “candidacy entrance interview” lasts approximately an hour. I had been in front of that panel for more than three. When a slight woman in all black came to the quiet room in which I waited, she only smiled, then said, “Welcome.”

It was through this layered history that I recognized the foster kid that came through the door of my church. It was why, beyond the call of the golden rule embroidered into the stole that I now shrugged on with almost thoughtless comfort, I felt compelled to love this human in too-tight jeans that never quite come clean. When pronouns evolved from he/him to they/their, we had a sermon on the importance of addressing people by their names as they recognized them, calling them the way Jesus called the twelve. Next, the pathway of faded carpet between the hard wood pews polished by a century of behinds became a runway for black nail polish. Then earrings that dangled well beyond a delicate earlobe. Next came lip gloss with a decidedly pink tint. Finally, full on drag, as best a 16-year-old with thrift-store allowance could produce.

It was not the club or the bar, or even the very wholesome hipster pizza parlor with drag brunch down the block from the

church, that first welcomed Reign St. Cloud. It was the body of Christ assembled as a neighborhood church who said, "Come as you are, my child. And leave nothing behind." It was by deliberate design and in shared mission, that Reign joined us to give her first sermon—ahem—"guest speaker gig" on Palm Sunday.

One of the most beloved traditions in this congregation was Palm Sunday. We absolutely celebrated, complete with a full parade where members of the local high school's alumni band brought out whatever pieces of old uniform they still fit into and wore them with feathers full and high, jaunty caps in place. For several years, we even had a hand-guided donkey named Dollie that journeyed with us around the block as we played kazoos and banged with joyful abandon against tambourines and hand drums while singing simple tunes in varied keys we plucked from the still-brisk Pennsylvania air. Palms were waved in greeting and distributed by the fistful to any curious onlooker or chuckling neighbor who came with hand extended.

We celebrated Palm Sunday as a playful protest, joy as revolution and resistance. Our Jesus came as the Lord of Misrule rather than an icon of domination, and we embraced that Palm Sunday was fabulous theatre of the absurd, open mocking of the empty pageantry portrayed by ego-driven seekers of adoration driven by the status quo, despite the power they wielded and the ugly exploitation needed to maintain it. Jesus, on a colt, accompanied by field workers with branches to scatter rather than coins and stolen spoils of war, displayed more true power than those who needed to steal what fed their identity from others ever would.

This year in particular, as we planned our protest parade, politics were heavy and public demonstrations were thick. Students were joining activists and organizers in Continental Square, the center of town just a block from the congregation's doors, on a regular basis. Too many of our neighbors were asking about the purpose and the presence of the Church in times that seemed to wail for civic engagement and education around it. It's true, the Church has been trained to shy away from controversy and challenge rebranded as political divide, and this year the lives of trans children and the performance of drag queens armed with children's

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books and princess crowns had been particularly vilified. But this was not about easy digestion of a peacefully partaken Thanksgiving meal. This was our own, our beloved. This was Isaiah. This was Reign. And so, we danced, we sang, we marched. We circled our city block and returned to the temple steps and laid our palms down on faded carpet beneath the daintily stepping feet of a 16-year-old in wrinkled satin as she strode toward the lectern. When she stumbled in chartreuse platform heels, we were the hands that steadied her. And when she spoke of family lost, and family found, of self-lost and of self-found, we cheered. When she admitted the near surrender to a battle with demons inside and out, we nodded and cried in empathy. And when she spoke who she was, clearly, with strength, without apology or compromise, from the high place, we echoed her name, we promised to continue to advocate in her lead, we were the family that believed her, and when she said that never again would she hide, we wept with the joy of the fellow disciples this season calls us to be.