

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Mark 11:1-11
SERMON TITLE: Inauguration Day

I have a quiz for you this morning? What happens once every four years on January 20, that has a special significance for our nation? The inauguration of the president of the United States. Inauguration Day is a big deal. In fact, it's such a big deal that the festivities are always spectacular, and no more so than this year.

For the historic swearing-in ceremony of President Obama—our first African-American president—an estimated crowd of between 800,000 and 1.8 million people gathered in Washington, D. C. Meanwhile, 37.8 million people watched the daytime festivities on 18 broadcast and cable networks.¹

The inaugural events included a parade that lasted more than two hours with more than 15,000 participants, 240 horses, dozens of marching bands, two drum and bugle corps and a mariachi band. The President and First Lady even traveled in a new armored limousine.² In addition, there was a luncheon, 10 official inaugural balls and an inaugural prayer service.

Having done presidential inaugurations for the past 220 years³, I'd say we've gotten it down to a fine art! We know how to honor our presidents!

But today, on Palm Sunday, April 4, 2009, we celebrate an Inauguration Day of a different sort. We remember an old story about the day Jesus of Nazareth was proclaimed ruler and king.

¹Schechner, Sam, and T. W. Farnam. "Inaugural Festivities Draw Near Record Numbers." The Wall Street Journal: Politics. 22 Jan. 2009. The Wall Street Journal. 4 Apr. 2009 <<http://online.wsj.com/home-page>>.

²"Inauguration of Barack Obama." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 3 Apr. 2009. 4 Apr. 2009 <<http://en.wikipedia.org>>.

³"United States Presidential Inauguration." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 30 Mar. 2009. 4 Apr. 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>.

Now Jesus also had an inaugural parade that was carefully planned. In fact, Mark pays great attention to the arrangements Jesus made in staging his parade. In particular, signals were worked out in advance for Jesus to acquire his mode of transportation for the big event—and it wasn't an armored limousine—it was a young donkey—a colt never ridden before.

One commentator has called Jesus' inaugural parade a piece of *street theater*⁴—designed to mock the imperial power of Rome and even the expectations of many of his own people. You see, Jesus planned his entry into the holy city of Jerusalem from the east—beginning at the Mount of Olives, the traditional location from which people expected the final battle for Jerusalem's liberation to come. But Jesus didn't mount a display of military might. This would be no Pax Romana, won at the point of a sword. Instead, Jesus came as one who commanded peace to the nations.

Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a colt. I can imagine his feet dragging the ground. He delivered no inaugural address that day, but the actions of this well-orchestrated street theater carried his message: "I will not lord it over others. I reject domination. I stand with the poor. I refuse the way of violence. I am here to turn the world upside down—because when it comes to the kingdom of God in the face of the status quo—upside down is right side up."

As for the crowds, Mark only says that there were *many people* gathered for the parade. I doubt that there were millions or even hundreds of thousands. There probably weren't many dignitaries around. The Roman governor, Pilate, certainly wasn't there. Neither were the leaders of the Jewish establishment. They looked for greatness in other places.

But the people who were there along the parade route did proclaim Jesus their king.

Many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches. They shouted:

⁴Charles L. Campbell, "Mark 11:1-11, Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY, 2008), p. 155.

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Come to think of it, it's probably a good thing that Pilate wasn't around for this little piece of *street theater*. He would surely have seen it as subversive—perhaps even treasonous.

When Pilate did enter the picture, we know the results: Jesus crucified, dead and buried. The Romans didn't want him around. Many of the religious leaders of Jesus' own faith wanted him dead. Even the adoring crowds turned against him. I guess he wasn't the kind of king they wanted after all.

So where are we in all of this? Well, we certainly get caught up in all the pomp and circumstance of presidential inaugurations, don't we? But even more than that, haven't most of us simply given up and given in to the status quo—to the systems of this old world—that in so many ways work against the kingdom of God as announced by Jesus? Let me put it to you in this way: Practically speaking, which exerts the greatest influence on our lives: presidents, legislatures, courts, the powers of the state, ideology, the systems of greed, domination and violence, or the way of Jesus Christ?

Well, if we're still mired in the old ways of the world, Jesus will keep messing with us. And we may not like it. The noted author Dostoevsky tells this story in his book *The Brothers Karamozov*⁵. Jesus visits a church during the Spanish Inquisition, but the cardinal won't let him in because he knows Jesus, and he knows that Jesus will just upset everybody. The cardinal said to Jesus: *Jesus, we have you down to a formula. We've captured you in doctrine and in ritual, and the people just love it. We give them what they want. So for their sake, go away. For their sake, don't come in here. You'll just disturb them.*

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (Raleigh, NC, 2007), p. 232f.

Well, Jesus can be troublesome, can't he? But on this day—April 5, 2009, in First UMC in Pflugerville, TX—as we remember an inauguration day of a different sort—we're asked to decide: Will this troublesome Jesus be the sovereign of our lives or not?