My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

A well-known Massachusetts politician was famous for showing up to campaign appearances in a old pickup truck. The truck was for show, leased for the campaign and was used in order to create a particular image. He was a longshot in an election for statewide office, but voters thought of him as a regular guy when he showed up in the pickup. He won the election, but for years and years this politician was known more for the truck than for anything he did in office. It didn’t seem to matter that he drove it only into and out of campaign stops, switching to a more suitable ride once the voters and cameras were out of sight.

These kinds of humble gestures are a critical tool those in power. They are a con game, establishing a bond with people without sacrificing any real power or prestige. And they are also polarizing. People favorable to the powerful person will see the gesture as genuine, or at least as an honest and respectful kind of fraud. Skeptics see manipulation and condescension. Both are true.

So when Jesus enters Jerusalem in Mark’s Gospel, he does so with some of the trappings of the triumphal processions known in his world: shouts of acclamation, palm branches waving and garments laid down in his path. But compared to the massive celebrations in far-away Rome, the seat of power of the Empire, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem pretty low-key. Crowds are everywhere in Mark’s Gospel up to this point, even in little villages, but not here. The text gives us license to imagine a small parade.

At the center of the entrance to Jerusalem is the story about the colt. Jesus tells his disciples to tell anyone who asks that the Lord needs it. He is no doubt playing on the ambivalence of a term that has both religious and political meaning, inspiring compliance out of love in the first sense or, failing that, fear of social standing in the second. Then he rides in on the colt. That is, on an animal rather than on foot, but on a modest animal and not an imposing one.

The difference between Jesus taking charge of a colt (or, in John’s version, a donkey) for his triumph and a king or general adopting the same animal as a show of humility is that, for a powerful man, this would be a gesture. He could get the right animal from among his riches to make the desired impression. For Jesus, the colt’s not even his, but borrowed. It is not a show of humility, it is humility in fact—humility as a condition.

This borrowing, though, is like the rest of Jesus’ life. He borrows his parade and his mount. In the next chapter he borrows a coin to illustrate a point about taxes. He borrows his lodgings and his earthly father. In Luke’s account he borrows his birthplace, and by all accounts he borrows his grave.

When we celebrate the procession of Palm Sunday as an unambivalent high point, we miss all this borrowing and patching together. Mark’s account, unlike John’s or Matthew’s, does not even note the fulfillment of the prophet’s word about a humble king. The story proceeds without that assurance. The people shout praises to Jesus with an appeal to save (“Hosanna!”) as one who comes in the name of the Lord (echoing the psalm), and a blessing on the “coming kingdom” of David. Mark’s account feels a little more desperate and risky than the others. I invite you to read the other Gospel accounts today on your own.

But then it all ends. In Matthew Jesus throws the city into turmoil, cleansing the temple. In Luke he makes lamentation over Jerusalem and mourning what has happened to it in God’s sight. In the Gospel of John the Pharisees lament that the world is going after him. But in our scripture today, Jesus enters Jerusalem, sees the temple, and since it’s late, leaves again with the Twelve for Bethany.

What we see in this passage is the opposite of the games played by powerful people to win over or intimidate the. There is no false humility, no show of force, no bandwagon, no manipulation, no misdirection from his real agenda. Jesus’ way of moving through the world is exactly what he’s been saying all along with his message and with this new crowd assembly that follows him.

But do we see a rapid reversal of Jerusalem’s response, from near-universal acclamation to shouts for crucifixion. Modern celebrations of Palm or Passion Sunday synchronize these two moments separated by several chapters. Worshipers seem invited to identify with the Jerusalem masses in both phases. But there is no reason to assume that the rabble waving palms and the rabble demanding Jesus’ death are the same—or represent Jerusalem as a whole. In Mark’s story, Jesus is very much a newcomer in a city that is going about its business. The popular response to his entry is not all that all-encompassing—he enters the city, the crowds have disappeared, and suddenly his presence is—‘’meh’. He leaves for Bethany without any fanfare at all.

 I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

For my two cents, this text is both a challenge and an opportunity. The truly humble Messiah and the politician faking it have nothing in common except that they provoke both acclaim and opposition, while leaving many of us lukewarm, inattentive, and dubious in the mediocre middle. When Christians ritually identify with the shouting crowd of Jerusalem, we may forget that not everyone saw themselves in this story—even then, in the holy city roiled by a man surrounded by messianic claims. So much less would everyone see themselves in it now. This is Greenland, after all. We don’t get all that excited by things in Portsmouth.

But maybe as a church and a society, we can see ourselves more clearly on the sidelines, as the indifferent or maybe someday persuadable who may note some disturbance in our world but see no strong need to take a position on it. The letdown at the end of the story addresses our world that feels neither the demand to respond nor the desire to deny it, neither the yearning pull of faith nor the scorn of rejection, neither the praise nor the blame.

But we’re not that nihilistic. We are the UCC, after all, a people of hope. In that null moment the course of Mark’s Gospel, and everything after it, changes. Thanks be to God, Amen.