

“Stirring Up the City”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

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April 9, 2017

[at beginning of service, Matthew 21:1-9]

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

***‘Hosanna to the Son of David!***

***Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’***

A lasting memory from my Introduction to the New Testament course in seminary, is of our professor standing with one foot on a chair and the other on the floor reenacting Matthew’s account of Jesus riding not one, but two different animals down the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem. What a balancing act to ride both a donkey and colt!

I cannot remember a thing the professor said about it, giving additional support to the premise a picture is worth a thousand words, or alternatively an image can reside more permanently in one’s memory than words. Yet implanted images can also cloud our seeing new insights.

We read an account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem each year on Palm Sunday, and perhaps because we know the story, we may not catch the twist every third year, when Matthew takes literally the dual animals of the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9). The other Gospel writers see the difficulty of riding two animals and pare it down either a donkey or a colt, each a sign of humility. Biblical scholars speculate on why Matthew did not do the same. We will not today.

Other than John’s Gospel, accounts of the procession portray Jesus as having a premonition of a donkey just waiting to be picked up. We could speculate he had secretly signed up for the Zip Donkey app, and thus pinpointed where the never-before-ridden donkey is parked. Since he is not picking it up, he gives the disciples the password to retrieve the animal – two animals in Matthew.

In the Gospel of John, the Palm Sunday procession is organized by a crowd who has heard Jesus is in Jerusalem. Jesus still rides a donkey, but one he wrangles himself. Yet, the point is not the mystery of how Jesus knew where to find a donkey, but that Jesus is in charge of this procession, and he is purposely making it look very similar to other royal processions people have seen enter Jerusalem. Matthew closes his account of the Palm Sunday entry with these two verses:

Matthew 21:10-11: *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'*

*The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'*

Marcus Borg and Dominick Crossan begin their book, *The Last Week*, imagining two processions converging on Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. While the suggestion is speculative, the possibility is quite real.

Matthew wrote his Gospel after Rome had destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple Herod the Great had rebuilt, in spite of his being a cruel tyrant. Matthew is writing for a Jewish people longing for a savior, a Messiah, a liberator, who would restore Jerusalem to its former greatness and be a king on the order of the still revered King David. It is quite likely that is on peoples' minds each year as they gather to mark the Passover, which celebrated God's passing over their homes in Egypt during the final plague of death, which led to their Exodus liberation from Pharaoh's oppressive empire.

If you have people gathering for a liberation celebration, those in power become skittish and wary, and call in Homeland Security. For Jerusalem, that was the governor appointed by Rome. His name is Pilate, and his mailing address is a beachfront town named Caesarea, where he could watch the sun set over the Mediterranean while sipping cocktails on the palace patio. By contrast, Jerusalem was an inland city, where Pilate had a condo provided by the empire, but likely went there only by necessity.

Festivals prompted such necessity, so his entourage would pack up and once ready, would have Pilate's regal horse ready for the governor to ride. He went to the city not out of admiration for the tenacity of the Jewish people, nor the sacredness of the Passover seder meal, but to keep order. Large numbers of people can mean trouble, and what better than a visible show of strength upon entering the city to create second thoughts for any who would create a stir. This was doubly true for a festival with political overtones; for again, Passover was a celebration of liberation from a previous empire that had oppressed the Jewish people.

This is all background for what Jesus did that day and the interplay we will experience this Holy Week. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus knows what he is doing. Matthew includes images from the prophets and the psalmist to fete Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, yet what Jesus has set up is a counter procession to the likes of Pilate, even if the governor did not arrive in town the same day.

Most likely, while Matthew speaks of a large crowd waving palms and setting down cloaks, it was likely only those who had been with Jesus in the days preceding his arrival on the Mount of Olives. In addition to his own disciples, there might be folk who had been healed, or those taken with his teaching. Perhaps a few festival goers, who had already had too much to drink will join in the hosanna shouting and palm waving, but I expect others in the city, even if curious, will remain cautious, and keep a distance given the political climate. Don't go too close or you might be considered one of them.

Jesus set it up – purposely paralleling his procession to the coronation of a king – not to mock but to contrast, and to say, a kingdom choice has to be made. As Tom Long writes, [Long, Thomas, *Matthew*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p.233.] Jesus' ride down the Mount of Olives into the city marks the “steady, undeterred cadence of the will of God.” At the end, Matthew writes the whole city was in turmoil, a word with the same root as earthquake. While likely the procession is small, this it is not a side show. The turmoil was of Jesus' doing.

Jesus was not a competing king. He was an alternative system of justice. He was not one who would bring a reign of power, but one who viewed greatness by the measure of compassion a nation showed. Tomorrow he will take on the temple injustice and corruption. Today, he risks setting himself before all of Jerusalem as the fulfillment of the king about which Zechariah (9:9-10) wrote with these words:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! 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.* Those are our familiar Palm Sunday words, but the prophet follows them with expectations of this new king:

*He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

The leaders of the temple would know these words. Leaders of Rome might as well, but even if not, Rome depended on chariots and warhorses and battle-bows. For them, they were the language of peace. Yet, even such threatening words from a single person could be dismissed. The problems arise when there are others who begin to believe them, followers who begin a counter-political, a counter-cultural, even a counter religious movement of peace and justice. So, those in power know their strategy is to split up or scare the followers and leave the one man standing alone. This week we will see how fear and threat trim down Jesus' closest disciples, leaving pretty much only the women at his side.

From the one side of Jerusalem we can imagine a procession of power, marked by Pilate on a regal horse, who with Herod and religious leaders will team up to take Jesus' life. This show of power will be visible to all.

From the Mount of Olives comes Jesus on a humble donkey, but the leaders are wrong about one thing. No one will take Jesus' life. He will give it freely. [Long, *Ibid.*, p. 234] Such power is visible only through eyes of faith.

Where will our eyes be directed this week, and what will we see? Perhaps we believe we can enjoy multiple processions, waving palms for Jesus, and flags for Pilate.

Then we remember Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives, to purposely create an earthquake of turmoil in the city. While he received the hosannas and palms, he was not seeking his own glory, but to establish a new kingdom set neither in temple nor palace. In this kingdom, his followers will cry for peace, even when it is politically correct to support war. His followers will speak of sacrifice, even when the culture assures us we are deserving. His followers will exhibit the power of humility, even when it is considered weakness.

*Lo, your king comes to you; humble and riding on a donkey.*

Even today we can witness two processions. Jesus will call us to choose which procession we will follow. If we follow one, we may be risking our life; if we follow the other, we may be risking our soul.