

**An Ironic Parade**  
**Text: Matthew 21:1-11**  
**The Reverend Christopher A. Henry**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
**Atlanta, GA**  
**March 16, 2008**

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"*  
*Matthew 21:10*

As a part of a church internship I had one summer in North Carolina, I was asked to lead the moment with the children, perhaps the most challenging and downright frightening requirement in all my years as a student. Joanna, after this morning I have even greater respect for you! We were in the midst of a sermon series on the various elements of the worship service, and so I decided to begin by asking the children what part of the service was their favorite. I should have known better. As my question was met with blank stares and one child began to get up and walk around the room, I realized my error. Most of these children left the sanctuary after the first scripture lesson, and many of those spent these first fifteen minutes doodling on a bulletin, playing with the one action figure they were allowed to bring into church, or flipping through the hymnal in boredom. In desperation, I looked at the one child who always had an answer in these moments. Jeanelle, I asked, what is your favorite part of the worship service? Hmm...she thought for a moment, "the parade when it starts." There was laughter in the congregation as folks thought of the opening processional, through the eyes of a child, as a parade.

On this day, Jeanelle gets it exactly right. Today is Palm Sunday and today it is all about the parade. It was on a Palm Sunday three years ago that I first attended worship at Morningside Presbyterian. When I tried to enter the sanctuary, I was directed instead to the street, where the Palm Sunday parade was about to begin. Wow, I thought to myself, this is a church that knows how to celebrate! Indeed it is, and this is the day to do it. Because today we welcome Jesus to the Holy City of Jerusalem.

The gospel writer Matthew paints a dramatic and dynamic picture of Jesus riding into the city. First of all, Jesus is riding two animals as he enters the city, a donkey and a colt. I must say, this would have looked quite ridiculous. But Matthew's point is clear as he quotes the prophet, "look, your king is coming to you." Jesus, whose whole ministry has taken place in the rural regions of Galilee, comes into Jerusalem for the first time and he chooses to do it on the back of a donkey, the very manner that the prophet Zechariah had predicted the king of the Jews would come: "humble and lowly is he, riding on a donkey." The crowd of people who saw it recognized immediately what Jesus was claiming. The moment of their redemption, their salvation, their freedom from the hated Roman

Empire was finally here. Their king had come. And so they tore branches from the trees and the coats from their back, and they shouted praise to God and to Jesus himself. Jesus' popular appeal and fame had never been higher. The multitude of disciples is ready to follow him anywhere, with swords and clubs if necessary.

The word that is on their lips is Hosanna, a Hebrew expression that means, "Save us!" Save us from the crushing weight of the Roman Empire on our backs. Save us from religious persecution and social alienation. Save us from marginalization and oppression. The crowd that gathers around Jesus is well aware of the symbolism of this moment, and they long to be saved by this one who will, they pray, wrestle the throne away from Herod. So they shout, Hosanna! Save us!

To the people of both religious and political power in Jerusalem, these are fighting words, a threat to the status quo. The people shouting careened from nationalism to wild-eyed religious fervor and back again. A frenzied anticipation that this teacher from Nazareth might indeed be the long-awaited, triumphant Messiah leads them to lift their voices in the ancient royal acclamation: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!

Matthew says that the whole city was shaken, just as Herod and all of Jerusalem with him were troubled when a baby was born and a star shone over a stable in Bethlehem. The whole city was shaken. This is the same verb he uses for the great earthquake at the crucifixion. The whole city is in turmoil, shaken, troubled.

The disciples and the crowd are shouting out loud cries of joy. The city and its leaders are frightened and in turmoil. In Jerusalem, the power of the Messiah and the power of the Empire will meet head-on, and every person in the Holy City seems to know it.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their recent book, *The Last Week*, with the striking observation that there were actually two processions entering Jerusalem on that day we call Palm Sunday. You see, it was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.

The authors write, "One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north...(the) story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman

governor...entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion." <sup>i</sup>

Tucked into this passage from Matthew is one short question that is at the heart of both processions. The crowd. The city. The peasants. The powerful. They all ask the same question.

Who is this? Matthew tells us that this is **the** question on the lips of all of Jerusalem.

I was in another setting this week in which this was **the** key question. Many of you know that my grandfather died on Monday night after a very short and difficult illness. But Poppa, as we grandchildren called him, had also lived a very long and meaningful life. As we stood in line for over two hours on Thursday evening, and again for over an hour on Friday, and greeted friends, family (some of whom I had never met), neighbors, and church members, I began to get a better picture of who this man really was. I knew him as a loving grandfather and a kind man, but I found out this week that my Poppa meant so much to so many in his community. The Amish men and women with whom he had worked and lived. The niece whom he had walked down the aisle over fifty years ago after her father died. The men and women whom he had coached in softball and baseball. The congregation members at Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church, where had been an Elder, Trustee, and (my personal favorite), longtime Sunday School Teacher. When I got back to house where I was staying, I was simply overwhelmed by the impact that this one man, who lived his entire life in rural Pennsylvania, who went about his work with humility and no fanfare, who raised three sons and was married for 57 years, the impact that this man had. Who was this man? Well, after the funeral service and time at table with so many who knew him, I learned that this man was much more than I had expected. And I learned that who he was depending on who you asked.

Who is this? It is the question that everyone in Jerusalem is asking, according to Matthew. And, as always, it depends on whom you ask!

Some in the crowd who paved the way for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem think they have the answer to that question. And so they proclaim that Jesus is the Son of David, a reference to the great king of Israel who was mighty in battle and a powerful monarch. The crowd sees in Jesus the potential for another King David, another era of prosperity and military success for the Israelites currently under the booted heel of the Roman Empire.

Others have another answer, "This is the prophet from Nazareth," the shout and in so doing call to mind the prophets of Israel and Judah who spoke words of judgment against the king and demanded repentance and change. They imagine

Jesus to be another prophetic voice against the established rulers, one who would declare God's righteous anger and judgment against the Romans.

Both groups of people have very valid reasons for believing what they say, and both answers to this question come from a deep disappointment with the way things are and a hope for redemption and renewal.

Son of David, powerful king. The Prophet from Nazareth, revolutionary hero.

But both answers are incomplete on this Palm Sunday.

If Jesus were simply the king, he would have ridden that donkey all the way to the palace of King Herod himself, and given him his eviction notice. If Jesus were simply a prophet, his parade would have incited a revolt against the leaders of the city and spoken God's judgment against all those who threatened to do him harm.

But Matthew does not record these events. They never took place. Instead, he tells us that Jesus rode into the holy city and went, not to the houses of power, but to the house of prayer and worship, the temple. There he continued the work that he had begun in Galilee, curing diseases, welcoming the outcast and the sinner, teaching in parables and proclaiming the love of God.

Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on this day, he overturns our expectations of divine and human power. Jesus rejects power as brute force, political domination, and absolute authority. His is the power of humility. The power of servanthood.

We entered the sanctuary just moments ago waving palm leaves wildly and singing words of jubilation and triumph: "All Glory, Laud, and Honor to thee Redeemer King." But those of you who have taken a moment to look ahead in your bulletin know that before we get out of here we will sing much more somber words: "See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down."

That is because it **is** a parade that we participate in this morning, to be sure, but it is one of dramatic and tragic irony. We who have read the gospel story before know that Jesus is walking into a trap. As he enters the temple, we know that there are those following him who will eventually arrest him in the garden. And so, even our most ardent efforts at pure joy on this Palm Sunday are blunted by the realization that this is not only a parade. It is also a funeral procession. Jesus is on his way to the cross.

Every year, on the Wednesday night of Holy Week, a small crowd of people gathers in a dimly lit room on the campus of Duke University. They gather to hear Duke professor and author Reynolds Price read his translation of the Gospel of Mark aloud in its entirety. I had the chance to go three times and find myself longing for the experience each year at about this time. The reading takes almost three hours, and it is absolutely mesmerizing. One is struck by how quickly the story moves along and by the ominous warnings spread throughout that Jesus is on a journey that will end in death. Each time, as he entered the gates of Jerusalem to shouts of joy and praise, I found myself almost convinced that it would be different this time, that Jesus would meet power with power and destroy his enemies before they could destroy him. And each time the story would move quickly on, hastening to its stunning conclusion. I will never forget leaving that room in silence each year, in awe and wonder of this story.

If we want to know what salvation and life truly meant to Jesus, and therefore what they must mean for us, we will have to travel beyond the beauty and festivity of this Palm Sunday. We will have to go beyond the parades and the banners, as poignant as they might be. We will have to go all the way to a hill called Calvary. We will have to stand in the shadow of the cross. Only there will we meet the true, saving power of Jesus.

This week, the road will be hard. We will walk through the streets of Jerusalem as the tide begins to turn against this prophet. We will witness a trial filled with corruption, injustice, and abuse of power. We will climb a hill called Golgotha where this funeral procession could have ended. Where the whole world though it did end.

But today the people are crying out, "Hosanna!! Save us!!"

Keep watch. He will.

---

<sup>i</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*, HarperOne Publishers, 2006, p. 2-3.