

Who is This?

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
April 9, 2017
Palm Sunday (Year A)

Matthew 21:1-11



Many of you remember our first Sunday back in this sanctuary after worshiping in Wilson Hall while it was being refurbished because of our capital campaign. We were full of expectations. New tile, new pew coverings, fresh paint, new lighting, and...new sound system. Everyone came into this beautiful space, and then I stood in front of the Communion table to speak the words, “The Lord be with you,” and I knew right away from the looks on many of your faces. Something was up with the sound. Poor Rich got up and down a dozen times it seems during that service to do what he could to adjust it. We got through it, but it was bumpy.

It seemed like every other person that came through the line at the end had something to say about the sound, and all I could do was respond, “You are not alone, and we will do all we can to address it (which, by the way, we continue to do and hope to have new speakers about two-thirds of the way back to help reach those hard to reach areas soon). I got to the restaurant to meet Kim and Chandler after worship, and I had barely opened the menu when Chandler said, “I guess you’d call that a soft opening.” All I could think to say in response was, “When is it you go to Cambodia?”

A soft opening. That’s what Palm Sunday feels like to me. There’s an intention here, but things just don’t seem to be quite up to speed. There are rough edges around this story. It feels like a warm-up for Easter, like we’re doing a mic check, seeing if the lights are shining in the right spots, tuning our voices for Easter “alleluias” with Palm Sunday “hosannas.” But the pitch doesn’t seem quite right, the sound is a little off, and we are not sure if we should be smiling or frowning, happy or sad, jubilant or muted. A soft opening. We’ve invited just the regulars, the ones who won’t leave if something is off, a test group ahead of the packed house of Easter.

We’ve packed in some pageantry. We have the palms, everyone waving them in celebration with cries of “Hosanna,” but we know that they are destined, in about a year, to be burned, and we will be marked with their ashes and told we are dust. We see Jesus being lauded and proclaimed as the king, but we know he is destined to be beaten and spit upon and nailed to a cross, the cry of “hosanna” (save us) turned to “My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me,” all the disciples and friends and this whole crowd of admirers having fled and left him alone. The children wave their palms right past this table, but the bread we proclaim as the body of Christ, broken, and the cup as the blood of Christ, shed – we know where this story is destined to go.

Many churches have done away with this confusing story altogether. They ditch the palms and go straight to the story of Jesus’ death. On most liturgical calendars, this Sunday is called Palm/Passion Sunday, giving churches the option of skipping this strange story and focusing instead on the story of Jesus’ betrayal and death. Knowing that only a fraction of worshippers will be present for the story’s telling on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, churches tell it on Palm Sunday – excuse me, Passion Sunday. And that’s got to be easier. Avoid this awkwardness.

Well, the good people of First Presbyterian in Franklin have a stubborn pastor to blame for making you endure, year after year, the procession of palms, this awkward shouting of “Hosanna!” I believe it is more than a soft opening. And the clue to its importance lies, I believe uniquely in Matthew’s telling of it. Here, only in Matthew, does Jesus ride on not one, but two animals. And only in Matthew is it said that the whole city was in turmoil, literally, the whole city was shaking and everyone asking, in fear, “Who is this?”

There is that odd scene of Jesus sitting astride not one, but two animals. Matthew is quoting two Old Testament prophets here. The first line, “Say to daughter Zion,” comes from Isaiah 62:11. But the bulk of the quote, “Lo, your king comes to you...humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,” is from Zechariah 9:9.

And the clue is in the way he selectively quotes from Zechariah. The full Zechariah text which Matthew quotes from says, “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.” Matthew leaves out “triumphant and victorious is he.” The king that enters Jerusalem is the true king, but he does not enter in triumph, he does not enter in victory, he enters in humility. To this shaking city comes not more violence, but peace.

A donkey in the Old Testament is a coronation animal, kings often rode into capital cities sitting on a donkey. A colt, a foal of a donkey, symbolizes peace. That Jesus sits on both indicates that he is a king, like none the people have ever seen.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the shaking city, filled with danger and brokenness and violence. He does not turn his head away; he does not change his way of peace. He sits atop two animals as a way of calling us to see him as a different kind of king. Jesus rides

into Jerusalem not to condemn it, but to redeem it. The events of the week to come will show us once again the lengths to which God will go to love us, and this whole shaking world, back to life.

We awoke to fresh awareness of how this world still trembles when twenty-five worshipers were killed in an explosion in a church in Egypt. Jesus rides into such terror. The cities of Syria shake with violence that threatens the world. Jesus does not turn his face, but rides into the shaking city.

The weekend before Palm Sunday I got a call from my pastor, the man who had been my pastor all my life in my home church. He was in town visiting his son, who was dying in the hospital of a rare liver disease. He asked me if I would come, and I found myself in the uncomfortable position of trying to be a pastor to the man who had been mine. His grief was fresh, and we talked a long time about life, and death, and the life to come, and I listened as he told stories of his son, his own namesake. We wept.

When I got ready to leave he said, “We’re going to be at your church tomorrow; we look forward to it.”

I was nervous. It would be Palm Sunday at the church. I wanted to call everyone and say, “Let’s hold it down this Sunday. There’s going to be someone there in a lot of pain.”

The day arrived, and the line formed out in the hallway. I looked around for my pastor, and was somewhat relieved that I didn’t see him. We went through the whole parade, shouts of hosanna filling the hallway, and then the sanctuary. As the last part of the line entered, I saw my pastor and his wife, pulling out all the stops, joyously waving their branches, shouting hosanna – right there, in the middle of their shaking city, in the middle of their pain, in the middle of it all, giving witness to the One who rides in, full of peace.

The whole trembling city looks up at this strange sight – a man on two animals, riding into town, and they ask, “Who is this?” No, this day is not a soft opening. It is the answer to the question, for the shaking city, for our trembling world, for us, here and now.

He is the king of peace. And there’s only one response needed, here at the gateway to the week we call holy. Hosanna. Save us. Amen.