

“A Tumultuous Entrance”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Palm Sunday – April 13, 2014

Matthew 21: 1-11

We have finally reached Jerusalem, after six weeks of Lent. We have finally come to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, where later in the week, Jesus will ask, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:39). We have finally arrived at the culmination of Jesus’ earthly ministry: his teaching, preaching, and healing has all pointed to this week in Jerusalem. We have finally arrived at Palm Sunday, where the King of Kings enters to shouts of, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Yet, by the end of the week, those same crowds will be shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

That is the paradox of Palm Sunday. It is a day that is festive and joyful, with singing and palm fronds waving in the air. But as Christians, we also know “the rest of the story.” We know that the praises will not last very long. We know that our Lord will be betrayed by one of his friends. We know that he will suffer and die on the cross for our sake. And we know that hope will overcome death with the empty tomb one week from today.

So how do we mark this holy day as the people of God? How does Palm Sunday influence or deepen our faith in the one who comes in the name of the Lord? How do we recognize that this tumultuous entrance into the Holy City not only sent turmoil amid Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago, but continues to shake our world in the 21st-century?

To begin with, we can take a closer look at exactly what is going on in Matthew’s account of this day, and consider how that deepens our understanding and meaning of Jesus’ entry. There were thousands more people in Jerusalem that day than there ordinarily would be. One estimate I read indicated that while Jerusalem would normally have had about 40,000 residents, during the week of Passover, the total number of people present could have been as many as 200,000 (*John Rollefson, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 155*). For many Jews, Jerusalem was the focal point of a year-long pilgrimage to celebrate this ancient feast. So there was already an air of excitement due to this annual religious ritual.

That was then heightened by the fact that several in the crowd had heard of this Jesus of Nazareth, had heard of his ministry throughout Judea and Galilee, and wondered if he was the one. Was he the one promised by God to save Israel and reign over the people as a divine king? Was he the one who would destroy Israel’s enemies in

battle and establish a new kingdom like that of David? Was Jesus the one who was the Messiah, the King of Kings?

For the Gospel writer Matthew, it is very crucial that we understand how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. Throughout his gospel, Matthew quotes the prophets to prove to his church that Jesus is the Messiah in the line of David. In his recounting of Palm Sunday, Matthew quotes both Isaiah and Jeremiah in verse 5, and he's so concerned with this day being exactly how the prophets foretold it, that it appears Jesus is riding two animals into Jerusalem! In the translation we read from this morning, it says that the disciples "brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them" (21:7). This is directly from the quotation in verse five, where we read that the king will come to the people "mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." We decided in our bible study on Tuesday that while we can nitpick the particulars of this irregularity, it's more crucial to recognize Matthew's insistence that this man is the one promised by God, to save Israel and humanity.

But, throughout the gospels, we witness the gap between the people's expectation of who the Messiah was to be, and Jesus' own understanding of his role as the King of Kings. The people have come to their understanding that the Messiah is to be this great warrior king who will overthrow all the earthly powers that have enslaved the Jews for so long. Jesus has a much different interpretation of his role as the Messiah, and it is that difference of understanding which leads to his suffering and death.

Based on the people's expectations, the welcome Jesus receives in Jerusalem is fitting of the hopes they had for their Messiah. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" If this Jesus is truly the Messiah, then he will come and establish David's kingdom here and now. The people shall welcome him as a king who is returning from battle - with palms and cloaks and shouts of joy and celebration. This shall be the day that will be remembered as a day of rejoicing, a day of triumph for the Lord!

But as we look closer at the story and the events that follow, we soon realize that Jesus does not fit neatly into the people's impressions of the Messiah. This king of kings rides into the city not on a fine steed, but on the back of a pack mule, a donkey that has never been ridden before. In Matthew's gospel, as soon as Jesus has entered amid such celebration, he goes straight to the temple and completely disrupts the day's business and trade. He throws the money-changers out, he condemns those who are selling and trading livestock and birds, he overturns tables and chairs and makes an absolute mess of everything.

As we know, later in the week Jesus teaches and heals and does things that challenge the Pharisees to no end. Instead of overthrowing the Romans who are in control, this Messiah is instead challenging his

own people's religious authority, and in so doing he causes so much anger and hostility that it gets him killed. Then, on Thursday night, he shows the difference between the kingdom he believes in, and the kingdom which those aligned against him believe in.

In a real sense, Palm Sunday is about the one who comes not in arrogance, but in humility. It is about the one who comes to cheers of praise, and is ready to face the trials when no one else will. It is about the one who comes to model humble service to his followers, including me and you.

One of the things we talked about Tuesday in our bible study was verse 10: "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'" Some of our translations interpreted "turmoil" as "stirred" or "with excitement." But the Greek word used here actually translates as "was shaken" or "trembled." In other words, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken and trembled." His entry was not solely a joyful parade, filled with praise. His entry caused tumult, trembling, and shook the city to its core.

One commentator offered an imaginative depiction of why it was so tumultuous. *Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. The one from the east was largely composed of peasants, following a certain Jesus from Galilee, riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives. On the opposite side of the city, from the west approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a warhorse at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He has come from Caesarea Maritima for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the potentially tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God, while Pilate's procession proclaimed the power of empire, thereby embodying the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion* (ibid, 153).

Jesus, as he has done throughout his earthly ministry prior to this day, causes tumult for the sake of God's kingdom. While the people seek an overthrow of their Roman oppressors, Jesus challenges their allegiance and faith, overturning not just money tables but also their long-established beliefs. When he is faced with power and might, he counters with humility and peace. Palm Sunday is a precursor to the events that follow, when in a week our Lord will offer love in the face of betrayal, and humility in the face of death.

And perhaps, in the crowds' reactions throughout this week, we witness our own struggles with our expectations of God not always matching with God's own expectations. Stephanie Jaeger describes how, as a fan of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team in the 1980s, she and the city had a love-hate relationship with one of its stars, Mike Schmidt. While he had helped them win the World Series in 1980, within five years he had fallen in disfavor with the city. One night, he tried to lighten the mood by going to bat wearing a curly wig and

sunglasses, which elicited a roar of laughter from the crowd. But by the end of the game, when he struck out with the winning runners on base, the crowd booed him relentlessly.

She writes: How did we turn from laughing to heckling in just a few hours? How does a crowd turn from shouts of joy and welcome to cries of murder in the span of a few chapters of scripture, a few days in the life of Jesus, an hour-long worship service?

When the people welcome Jesus through the city gates, they are looking for a winner. The people wave palm branches and call out "Hosanna" because they anticipate that Jesus will save them from Roman occupation. But the would-be "king of the Jews" doesn't act very kingly. He allows himself to be arrested, to be hung up on wood like a common criminal. When the crowds realize that Jesus isn't the kind of hero they expected, they turn on him. Disappointment turns to rage.

What are our expectations about how God saves? Do we set ourselves up for disappointment because we confuse modes of human victory with God's saving grace? The core revelation of Palm Sunday is this: God doesn't save in the ways we might expect. God doesn't rule the way humans do. God dominates with love, not violence. God overpowers through sacrifice, not by taking away. God wins by suffering, not humiliating – suffering and aligning God's self with those who suffer ("Living the Word," *Christian Century*, April 2, 2014: 21).

Thankfully, God doesn't rule the way we do. Thankfully, God doesn't judge the way we do. Thankfully, God doesn't act according to our expectations of God. Thankfully, God shakes our world to its core – not only today, but Thursday, and Friday, and next Sunday – to show the world how deeply God loves us sacrificially in his Son. May our walk of discipleship this Holy Week be aligned with God's sacrificial love, who is our King of Kings.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen.