

Palm Sunday – March 28, 2021
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Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

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

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Sermon: Mistaken Identity

You know how when you’re driving down Route 2, heading east into Boston...just past the Mormon Temple in Belmont, then through Lexington, and in Arlington there’s that big hill. And when you get to the top of it, you can see the Boston sky-line? There’s also a similar spot on I-93 as you drive south toward Boston.

Well, the route that Jesus and his followers would have traveled that first Palm Sunday 2000 years ago was similar...anticipation increasing as they climb the east side of the Mount of Olives just out of sight from the city. They know that their path will lead them to a turn in the road at the crest of the mountain where suddenly a vista of the Holy City bursts into panoramic view before their eyes.

This moment in Jesus’ life is commonly called the Triumphal Entry. But really it is not the way Jesus arrives at Jerusalem which makes it so triumphal, but rather the peoples’ expectations of Jesus which make it so.

Here’s what the people sang and chanted that day.

Hosanna!

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

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Hosanna - means *save us* - and what they were actually singing was Psalm 118 (the only place that we find this word in the Old Testament). Well, and, Psalm 118 is a conqueror's Psalm. Because what the people wanted was a conqueror.

The same people who had been hanging out with him hearing him teach and preach, watching him heal and work miracles like turning water into wine and multiplying food so that all could eat...

The same people who had heard story after story of God turning situations on their head suggesting that the meek will inherit the earth, and those who are grieving will be comforted, and that those who think they are great really aren't...

The same people who didn't just hear him talk about these things, but saw him share meals with criminals, and gather children on his knee, and forgive the unforgivable, and cry with his friends, and outwit the religious professionals...

After three years of all this, they still thought he was the leader of a political revolution to overthrow the government and institute a new order in the land that would favor the Israelites.

And so, their coats went down, they grabbed the closest palm branches to wave in honor and celebration of the coming "king," and they sang a victory song.

Well, and, us too... We also want a conqueror! We do our best with what we have, given the situations we're in and the resources available to us. But then something happens that requires all our attention and energy - a laser focus to the exception of anything else - our world shrinks down to only that thing, and it's too much!

Lord save us - Hosanna!

And, sure enough, Jesus shows up - but riding on - of all things - a donkey!
Which actually sounds more strange to us than it would have in Jesus' time.

You see, by riding a donkey, Jesus actually predicts His role as the King who comes in peace. The people who were there when Jesus rode into Jerusalem would certainly have known the difference between the way Jesus came riding in, and the pageantry that usually greeted Roman Emperors returning from war.

When a king would return from war victorious, he would ride a prancing horse at the head of a procession that included his warriors, a shackled contingent of the conquered people now prisoners, and an extravagant display of the riches that the army had taken by force. A king riding on a horse meant a victory of bloody conquest.

But if the king approaches on donkey, it means he is seeking peace. And so it is with King Jesus. He makes His entrance on a donkey - a symbol of peace, not war; a symbol of humility, not pride. And behind Him comes an entourage of twelve fishermen, called to be disciples, and a rabble of common people whom He has healed and set free. They are the trophies of His conquest - not by bloody violence, but by unconditional love.

For those who want to see Christianity represented by a leader on a prancing horse at the head of a conquering army showing off its trophies, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a big disappointment.

Boy I wonder what Jesus was thinking when he saw the little parade as he made his way into the city. He knew what was ahead for him that week - though they didn't. They shouted in praise - as he was about to lose everything. They shouted "save us" - as he himself headed into death.

I wonder if he had that pit - that sick feeling in his stomach - you know, when you know something bad is about to happen and you can't do anything to stop it.

They don't even know the irony of their cry for Jesus to save them! But still the cry is real - authentic - genuine. They do need a Savior! And so do we! Because life - some of the time? much of the time? is heavy! too much even!

And while we probably want our situations to change: for the cancer to be benign, for the fighting to stop, for a few more hours in the week to get everything done.

What we get instead is the Prince of Peace, who rides not only into Jerusalem, but into our hearts and lives as well. We get the promise of God's presence amidst the craziness. We get the Holy Spirit who blows into our lives in unexpected ways:

A chance meeting with a friend you haven't talked to for ages,
A meeting is cancelled and your day becomes manageable,
The just right Bible verse appears in your Facebook newsfeed,
A kind word from the cashier at the store.

Jesus' riding on a donkey.... And bringing peace.

The phrase "beast of burden" did not appear until the 18th century, but is still an apt association here... because in carrying Jesus into Jerusalem the donkey is indeed carrying a great weight and burden, taking Jesus on the first leg of his journey to the cross.

And Jesus himself also carries a great weight and burden. The weight of the world in fact - literally - the burden of all humanity goes with him.

YOUR burdens....

Your worries for your children...go with him
The grief that won't heal...goes with him
The failure from years ago that you just can't shake...goes with him
The shame that burns white hot, that no one else sees...goes with him
The fear that has no name...goes with him
The thing that you are convinced is unforgivable...goes with him

And with him....it will all be crucified...killed. And just as Jesus gets a resurrection body - so will everything that goes to the cross with him. And like Jesus - we may have to go through hell to get it. And you know what they say about when you're going through hell? Keep going! Keep going.

Jesus does indeed institute a new world order... And bring about peace...

It just may not look like we expect it to look.

Amen.