

March 16, 2008  
Matthew 21:1-11

### “Who is This?”

Matthew’s gospel has blood spilled all over it. It opens with King Herod on a rampage killing babies in Bethlehem – and ends with the child who escaped that bloodthirsty ruler being marched away under Pilate’s orders to carry out the bloody scene of a crucifixion.

Today’s lesson from Matthew is what has come to be called the triumphal entry – Palm Sunday – leading into Holy Week – the Passion Story of Christ....played out over the next few chapters of Matthew’s gospel, which does end with the victory of the empty tomb and resurrection. Today we find Jesus riding into town – about to bring out the worst in us – riding into town amid cheers and hosannas and waving palms. Yet, in just 4 days the darker side of human emotion will surface as the cheering turns to jeering, the *hosannas* turn to *crucify him*....

How is this possible?

It is good to hear again the story of Holy Week. I’d like us to place ourselves in the story as we go through the events of the week. This is how it begins: Matthew 21:1-11

SERMON: (Let’s put ourselves into the scenes as we move through the week – so full of drama, full of passion.)

We begin – just above the city, coming in from the north. We enter the city deliberately, because plans have been made ahead of time. The donkey has been lined up, a place found to eat the Passover meal together – and we’re ready to Take On Holy Week.

Passover is such a great holiday. The town is packed with pilgrims. Coming to Jerusalem for Passover is a once in a lifetime journey to the Holy City, the pilgrimage of pilgrimages – the epitome of sacred journeys ~ to be able to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. The crowds would be thick – to say nothing of the other residents, and then there are all the occupying forces of Rome, beefed up to handle these rousing crowds. The parents must have said to the children there would be a parade – let’s go see The Man coming into town – The Man who will save us. *Who is it?* they ask in v. 10. Who is The Man on the donkey? They answer, *He’s a prophet from Nazareth*. A prophet – really? We haven’t heard from a prophet in centuries.

It is into this holiday spirit that he rides into town – The Man, humble and on a donkey. A Savior on a donkey? How quaint. He’s not come ready for battle, but he’s come riding a donkey, announcing to all that he comes in peace. Craning our necks to catch a peek at The Man – we wave our palms, shout *hosanna*. Maybe he’ll hear me and look my way, “Hosanna, hosanna!” How great to be noticed by a famous person passing by in a parade.

*Who is it?* Why are we all waving? We’re hoping he’ll give a rousing speech – tell us how well we’ve been doing in taking on the challenges of faith in an occupied land. Hopefully he’ll tell us that he’s God’s messenger of salvation, bring us some good news! Hopefully he’ll make everything right in our miserable lives!

That isn’t how it plays out though. Instead he tells us we’ve neglected the things that make for peace, that we’ve been neglecting God, and in 4 days all this negative speech-making will get really old, really annoying, and the Hosannas will have been replaced by shouts of “Crucify Him”. As much as we love shouting *Hosanna*, try saying “Crucify Him” with the same vigor. Can’t do it very well, can we? Not sitting in here like this. We’re not angry enough. The words are too hateful for polite company. Church people don’t go berserk and call for blood. Hate is such a powerful motivator. Crowd moods get so ugly. In this place we like to say *Hosanna* – we wouldn’t dare to say a *Crucify Him!*

I wonder about the children in the crowd. What must they have thought? If indeed it was the same people from Sunday that came out on Friday to call for his death, what were the children thinking? Their parents so eagerly brought them to the Palm Parade – to see The Man come into town. Such fun to wave branches and shout Hosanna. A picnic by the road, jumping and hollering, and throwing candy off the floats.

But on Friday – what did the children think when their folks' happy faces were screwed up in anger and blood thirst as they cried out for death. I wonder what the children thought then? Did they take up the chant, too? Crucify him! Would the children say it, too?

Think about the children this week. What do we tell our children about anger and hatred? How do we guide our children through Holy Week? Next Sunday the light will be in their eyes as they eagerly await the joy of the Easter morning (and their basket). But what do we tell them about Good Friday? The anger, the anguish, the hatred and torture. We tell them the story of our faith. We tell them of the drama of it all – the passion of this Holy Week. It is good to think about the week as a whole, as Matthew tells it for us. As we take on this Holy Week, we start with the waving palms today, then we move to Monday with Jesus roaring into the Temple, violently and angrily overturning the tables of the moneychangers. Can't you see it? He flips the tables, sending the doves and pigeons flapping in all directions, the lambs bleating and running scared, the men scrambling for cover behind the tables as the whip cracks overhead, the coins clattering on the cobblestones and rolling into the crevices. The indignant prophet's wrath cries out, "You have made my Father's house a den of thieves."

Then on Tuesday and Wednesday, his authority is questioned as he comes again to the Temple area to teach the parables of the kingdom, to heal the blind and lame. This is when we hear the oft-quoted lines *Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's*. And on another occasion, *Woe to you blind fools, you Pharisees, scribes and hypocrites all of you! You cleanse your cups on the outside, while the inside is full of filth!* He speaks of the destruction of the Temple, tells the parable of the Master who entrusted much property to his servants and then went away – coming back later to see how well they'd done with that which was entrusted to them, in having made their Master's investment in them grow. He tells of the separating of the sheep and goats, and the story of *when did you see me hungry and thirsty, naked and lonely? As you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me*.

And then it's Thursday. As the chief priest Caiaphas took counsel on how to kill Jesus, the disciples were eating the Passover meal in the Upper Room. The sacrificial Passover lamb, the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, the cups of wine poured out in remembrance of the blood on the doorposts, so God's angel of death would 'pass over' those homes, sparing the first-born sons, and the convincing of Pharaoh *to let God's people go*. And Jesus saying, *whenever you do this - break the bread and drink the cup - remember me*.

Then into the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples and Jesus go to pray. The betrayal, the arrest, Peter's denial – the trial, the scourging, Judas hanging himself, Jesus' standing before Pilate – and finally on Friday the crucifixion – the last words – when the very earth itself begins to heave and shake as the rocks split and the very foundation of the world shifts. The very veil of the Temple splits in two – top to bottom. That veil that separated the High Priest from the Holy of Holies where God dwelt and with it the access to God is now open – no longer hidden. Through Christ, we now have access to God. Or is it the other way around: God now has access to us – and no one is safe anymore. [Thomas Long]

And the women looked on, as the rich man Joseph of Arimathea offered his own tomb for the body... And here we stop today ...not because the story ends – but because it continues... next Sunday

The story is painful as Matthew tells it all. Read it this week – read it each day as it unfolds: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday ... It's a painful story – but we're ready for it. We're ready for it because of the past five weeks of preparation in which we've been "taking it on...instead of giving it up." We're ready to bear the cross, take the final journey to Golgotha – because we've taken on the parable of the talents that Jesus gave us and so many of us chose to grow our money for God; we've taken on the challenge of helping others find their way into this caring fellowship of faith; we've taken on the challenge of evaluating the use of our time – the same amount of time everyone has each week, and using it wisely; we've taken on the challenge of caring for the gift of God's creation, and we've taken on the challenge of loving ourselves, so that we might so love others – as God so loves us.

Today – we've take on the challenge of the Palms. We once again hail the arrival of our savior – humble and riding on a donkey – coming into the world in peace, not battle. We wave the branches of victory and joyfully shout *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!* And remember how all too easily these cheers turned to anger and hatred -- or worse yet, indifference -- unless we are reminded of what happens this week in our faith journey.

I invite you to keep your palm this year. Keep it somewhere in your home where each time you look at it, it will remind you of the crowd. The crowd was ready for a parade, eager to celebrate a victory. See

him coming on the donkey – the Christ bearing donkey. It's all looks so Hollywood – unless we remember the rest of the story. Jesus took the risk of the palms. The disciples had begged Jesus to avoid Jerusalem. They were very nervous about the climate in the city. Play it safe this year, they suggested. Let's skip the Passover scene – let things quiet down, lay low, let the leaders calm, the politicians relax – put our focus elsewhere . All this talk about suffering and dying, betrayal and denial is such a downer. After three years of hanging in there with Jesus, listening, learning, following, it was just too much to pass through the fire of trial – and the disciples bailed on Jesus as the storm clouds gathered. Will we bail too when it gets tough to follow Jesus? Or will we choose to take the risk of the palms – we know who it is that rides the donkey, and like the children, we know that we, too, have been called to be the Christ-bearers.

“Who is this?” the crowds asked. They're waving and they don't know to whom or why they're waving? It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee, the crowd responds. Do we know for whom we are waving? A worker of miracles? A rabbi extraordinaire who knows the scriptures inside out? A healer of the blind and lame? A savior of the people? Who is this that has brought you to this palm-waving event? For whom have you taken up the palm of risk? The one whose name you bear. The giver of life. Your Lord and your Savior. Take on Holy Week! Amen.