

A Dangerous Parade
A sermon preached by
Dean L. Francis
First United Methodist Church of Evanston
April 9, 2017

Matthew 21:1-11 (CEB)

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. ² He said to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it.” He sent them off right away. ⁴ Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, ⁵ Say to Daughter Zion, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey’s offspring.”^[a] ⁶ The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

⁸ Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”^[b] Hosanna in the highest!” ¹⁰ And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. “Who is this?” they asked. ¹¹ The crowds answered, “It’s the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

There's a Bizarro Comic that has the Buddha and Jesus sitting in the clouds. “*I should have made one of those nobody-can-depict-me rules,*” says Buddha. “*They always make me fat.*” “*Tell me about it. I've been a blond white dude for, like, 2,000 years,*” Jesus replies.

We always see Jesus through the eyes of our culture. It is something we take for granted until we travel outside the United States and see the various depictions of Jesus from around the world. There is a website called *The 20 Faces of Jesus* that does this so we don't have to travel, and in each instance Jesus looks very much like the people of the region that birthed the art.

I suppose that shouldn't be surprising to us because it's a natural thing to begin with our own visions and preconceptions. But knowing this about ourselves, the question that comes from much of the gospel narrative is, how much we will let ourselves be challenged by the stories of Jesus? What injustice will we do to him as we seek to make his story fit our purposes? How will we misunderstand the stories if we use them to reinforce the Jesus that we want to follow?

This of course is the struggle throughout the gospels; it is the struggle of worshippers and preachers. The faithful and the faithless have all sought to use him in ways that bolstered their narrow conceptions of who Jesus is and what he demands of us.

And the Palm Sunday stories are certainly ones where this bias toward familiarity can be seen quite vividly. Interpreters have told us so many, often contradictory things about Jesus' dangerous parade. We have been told that it is about his humility because he rides on a donkey (or two in this case, but more about that later). We have been told that the parade is a direct challenge to the Romans. We have been told that the crowds were proof of his popularity. We have been told that the whole thing is street theater, a giant production to "stick it to the man." Matthew certainly thinks that it's a reinforcement of Old Testament expectations. So, this list goes on and if we were honest with ourselves, we'd try to trace these interpretations back to our own hopes and preconceptions.

One of the things that is lost to some of us in interpreting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is that it takes place during the Passover. The size of Jerusalem certainly would have swelled because of the number of pilgrims who were coming to the temple. The holiday itself was a celebration of freedom from the slavery imposed upon them by Egypt. It was a nationalistic celebration of independence from a foreign oppressor. The best equivalent in American life is the 4th of July. So, the counterpoint to this celebration of independence is the fact of Israel's occupation by yet another foreign oppressor, the Roman empire. All of the pilgrims are coming to Jerusalem to celebrate their release from captivity while they are under the watchful eye of yet another captor, the Roman empire...awkward!

Matthew writes that when Jesus entered Jerusalem the whole city was "in turmoil." The Greek word translated as turmoil has the root we use for seismology— earthquakes. There is so much tension between the Passover celebration and the Roman reality it is almost as if the city is shaking. And the Romans are no doubt monitoring the situation carefully, making sure that the crowds don't get out of hand, keeping an eye on the zealots who might take this opportunity to create a rebellion. We know from the story of Jesus' passion later this week that there will be another earthquake in Jerusalem at the moment of Christ's death. So this isn't a calm and tranquil scene. In the words of Jerry Lee Lewis, "There's a whole lot of shaking going on."

And the present reality of Roman jitters is reinforced by the Hebrew expectations. It is not surprising that the city was shaking, because Jesus has come from the Mount of Olives. The

symbolism is clear: the Mount of Olives was the place from where Zechariah pronounced that God's final rescue of Israel would come. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem provides a bookend to Matthew's story. It begins at Jesus' birth when "King Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Now the political shaking continues and the people are no doubt wondering what is about to happen. Both sides know that things could get out of control. The Romans are dancing the careful choreography of all occupying forces who seek to keep the populace under control by a combination of the carrot and the stick. In the Passover, the Jews may be celebrating their liberation from Egypt, but the Romans need to make sure they don't forget who is the current emperor.

The symbolism of the animals in the story is also important. Paul Meir writes that the image of Jesus riding two animals at once is proof that you can't take the story literally. It is a quote from Zechariah, but in Zechariah, the colt, the foal of a donkey, are descriptors of one animal. Here in Matthew the animals gain a split reality. And what the donkey is not, is a warhorse. Jesus comes in peace even though his very presence is a threat to the Roman state.

If there is anything this story represents it is the conflict of expectations, allegiances, and visions. The crowd shouts hosanna, save us...but even they must have had differing ideas of how that salvation would take place. And none of them would have seen the pathway to salvation as traveling to and beyond the cross.

Dr. Mark Cross is a psychiatrist in Australia who has spent his life encouraging people to acknowledge, support, and assist people with mental illness. He is an author and YouTube contributor who often uses stories about his patients to point to the conflicts in our own lives. In one of these conversations, he talks about a time in his mental health unit when there were two patients who believed that they were both Kings of England. And he talks about how facing this inherent conflict of world views actually helped the patients to come to grips with their delusions.

Almost every day we face conflicts large and small that point to the fact that we are trying to live in a world of two kings, two Lords, two sets of priorities. We work so hard to provide for our families, yet the more we work the more we are separated from them. Corporate leaders toil to maximize their profits, but sometimes it is at the expense of their workers or the environment. We watched in horror as chemical weapons were used again in Syria and then we

watched in horror again as cruise missiles were launched this week. Life itself is a series of conflicts and competing priorities. And we are the ones who are deluded if we think we can have two kings without conflict. We shout out *save us*...but will we put aside the conflicts that prevent this from happening?

There is nothing in Matthew that suggests Jesus was coming to set up a parallel kingdom, or some kind of church you could attend without upsetting the Roman overlords or their Temple lackeys. So what would we have done, if we were in the crowd? What are we doing now? How can you have, or live for, a realm of peace in the midst of other empires that occupy our hearts if not our homes?

Palm Sunday should bring turmoil to our hearts, for it is no simple thing to say Jesus the prophet from Galilee has entered the city of God. It is a complete challenge to the way things are. Throughout Israel's history this has been the expectation. When Jesus comes to Jerusalem, Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, and other prophets walk with him. There is no reason to think the empire will not strike back if we are true to his message.

So we are charged, not to see him as the familiar, the blond, blue-eyed kid next door, but instead as the embodiment of that which we can barely comprehend. The prophet who is beyond our control and our foretelling. But if he does not march into our hearts and cause some severe turmoil, then Easter is just an old story. And we will be unmoved.