

3-29-26 Palm Sunday sermon

Matthew 21.1-11

“When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”

Matthew begins his account of the life of Jesus with a similar declaration. Cast your mind back to Epiphany, when we heard the story of the magi from the East, arriving in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child, born king of the Judaeans? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was *frightened*, and all Jerusalem with him. Now, Matthew uses an even stronger word when that infant the magi visited now arrives in Jerusalem as a grown man, in the most dramatic fashion. “The whole city was in turmoil.” Perhaps a better contemporary translation of that word would be, “The whole city was *shook*.” In fact, it’s the same Greek word Matthew employs to describe the moment Jesus draws his final breath just a few days later: “The earth *shook*, and the rocks were split.”

While our annual palm procession is a lot of fun, it really doesn’t capture what was happening in Jerusalem that day, nor how Matthew’s original audience would have heard this story. For the very ground under their feet *was* shaking. The foundations of their life were being shook, as this strange figure, riding, of all things, a young donkey, arrives in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Not as just one among the tens of thousands of pilgrims arriving for the biggest festival of the year, but as one being acclaimed by the crowds as the Son of David, the Messiah of God! The one they’ve been waiting for for four hundred years. Could the crowds singing the words of the psalm of ascent that Harold just read really believe *this man* was the Messiah? What would the Sadducees and the High Council make of that? What would *Rome* make of that? For while this procession of the rural poor of Galilee arrives in Jerusalem from the East, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was approaching Jerusalem from the West. Having left his coastal residence, where he enjoyed the cool breezes off the Mediterranean, as opposed to the heat and smell of the city, Pilate led a parade of Roman military might towards Jerusalem. Cavalry on horseback, legionnaires marching to the beat of drums. The bright color of banners, and the flashing gold of the Eagle standards of the legions: the triumphal entry of the local representative of an all-powerful empire, coming to remind this conquered people who their masters were. Jerusalem was always a tinderbox during Passover, the population of 20,000 swelling to 200,000 or more, and there were always wannabe messiahs ready to lead an insurrection. Which the Romans would swiftly and brutally put down. Every single time. So, yes, no doubt, the whole of Jerusalem *was* shook. What was going to happen in the city *this* Passover?

Matthew’s audience would have *no* trouble imagining what could happen. Because the horror and brutal suppression of the Jewish-Roman war was still fresh in their memory. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple was still being lamented. Even if this is the first time they’re hearing Matthew’s story, *they* know it’s not going to end well for Jesus.

But, Matthew tells us, the crowds that day were filled with *hope*, not fear. So much so, apparently, that they re-enact the last time their people rose up against an occupying army, during the Maccabean revolt, two hundred years earlier, when Judas Maccabeus arrives in Jerusalem at the head of the army that had driven out their oppressors, the crowds waving palm branches as he passed. Matthew tells us that what he's describing "took place in order to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Look, your king is coming to you, *humble*, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' But those in Matthew's audience who had memorized that passage from the prophet Zechariah, would note that Matthew had removed a phrase from the middle of it:

"Lo, your king comes to you; *triumphant and victorious is he!*"

While we often call the events of that day, 'The triumphal entry,' Matthew himself does *not*. In fact, he goes out of the way to *avoid* giving that impression. And so, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, with a crowd waving palm branches, singing the great psalms of ascent and declaring, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' And the whole city is shook.

They ask those in the procession, "Who is that guy?" Because the urban elite have had little exposure to Jesus, who spent most of his time in Galilee and the villages of Judaea, only rarely coming into Jerusalem. I'm sure those who responded to the question had big grins on their faces. "Why, don't you know? This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth... in Galilee." Perhaps they even looked up at the Temple, saying, "And he's here to tell the people up there, it's time for them to relinquish their power. One of *us* is going to be The Man from now on."

The people wanted a Messiah, to drive out their pagan overlords as Judas Maccabeus had done: but this Messiah would be enthroned on a pagan cross. They wanted a prophet: but this prophet would tell them their city was under threat of God's *judgment*. They wanted a king to liberate them from the tyranny of their oppressors: but this king had come to liberate them from the tyranny of sin and death. They wanted a mighty warrior-king to restore the throne to Israel: but this king is coming to them, "humble and riding the foal of a donkey."

None of this should have come as a surprise to Jesus' disciples. After all, they had spent three years with him, hearing his teaching, watching his living. Experiencing the kin-dom of God that he was inaugurating, this new family, one that looked very different than that of the empire of Rome. One that called out the failure of the leadership of his people to care *for* their people. Jesus' teaching stood in contrast to the world that the powerful had created:

"Blessed are the meek... the merciful... the peacemakers... the persecuted."

"You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, "Do not resist an evildoer. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Give to everyone who begs from you.

You have heard it said. 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also.'

And in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you: for *this* is the Law and the Prophets."

When asked who will inherit this kin-dom, Jesus' response?

"Those who feed the hungry. Those who provide water for the thirsty.

Those who welcome the strangers among them.

Those who clothe the naked

Those who care for the sick

Those who visit people in prison.

"For when you do that for the least of these, my kin, you do it for me."

Mercy, forgiveness, generosity, non-violence, enemy-love. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger. This is the kin-dom that Jesus both proclaimed and embodied.

The disciples had born witness to it for three years and yet, apparently, they were just as much in thrall to the kind of messianic hope as the crowds were that day, as their varied responses to the events of the coming week would reveal.

If we take Jesus' life and teaching seriously, then that requires us to ask difficult questions of ourselves, especially in times such as these that we're living in now. On this Sunday when it is impossible not to use political speech – because Jesus' fulfillment of the prophet's words was political theatre – let us be clear that while 'Christian' may be a helpful noun, it's usually an *unhelpful* adjective. So, when we talk about the rise of "Christian nationalism" here and elsewhere, let's acknowledge that that's an oxymoron. For the kin-dom of God that Jesus brought is not restricted to one nation or nationality. There is a world of difference between patriotism and nationalism. Any movement that claims the adjective of "Christian" for itself, but which seems only interested in enacting God's wrath against perceived evildoers while not enacting God's mercy for those who are suffering in our midst, is not a Jesus movement. Any movement that seeks power *over* others, rather than power *with* or *for* others is not a Jesus movement. Any movement that is xenophobic is not a Jesus movement. Any movement that works to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few is not a Jesus movement. Jesus' life and teaching in the Gospels makes all that abundantly clear.

Because the kin-dom that has come with Jesus was *not* welcomed by those in power in Jerusalem. The kin-dom that Jesus proclaimed was denounced by the bible scholars and experts in the law. Even the crowds who hailed him as king that day had outsized expectations of Jesus that were a complete mismatch with what Jesus actually had to offer them. Which was himself – not with the power of the sword, but with the power of the love he demonstrated on the cross: self-giving, self-denying love. Allowing himself to be put on

display on a torture device submitting himself to Rome's ultimate statement of its absolute power, in order to break the power of sin, and violence and death once and for all. Because in his resurrection – which we will celebrate with joy next Sunday:

when the religious establishment – which felt threatened by Jesus' alternative vision of what life looks like under God's reign – thought *they* had had the final word;

when Rome thought *they'd* had the final word;

when the powers and principalities thought *they'd* had the final word;

They had not. God did. And that word was life.

And God's will is for *all* to share in that life, life in abundance. The life that Jesus promises to any and all who believe *in* him, and *believe* him, taking him at his word, and walking his Way. But we keep getting drawn back, time and time again, to what the powers and principalities offer us. We are so often tempted by the power represented by the procession coming from the West, even though it is a bankrupt, and defeated power.

Let me end with one other phrase from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruit."

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Do they use the name of Jesus, but sound nothing like Jesus? Do they claim to be Christian, but look nothing like Christ? Do they ask the church to join their procession of power from the West, while making fun of the foolishness of the procession coming from the East? "You will know them by their fruit." The invitation on Palm Sunday is always to join the procession coming from the East, but then to follow Jesus on *into* Holy Week. To watch Jesus drive the moneychangers out of the Temple. To sit at the Table with his disciples, break bread, drink from the cup. Then on to the Garden, where Jesus practices what he preaches, by not resisting the evildoers who come to arrest him. When one of his disciples takes up a sword and slashes wildly, Jesus heals the man his disciple wounds, then tells him to put away his sword. We will watch Jesus endure a mockery of a legal system, being declared innocent one minute, then condemned to death the next. We will watch Jesus be executed by the State at the behest of the local powers that be. The price for "keeping the peace." I hope you'll join us for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, to be reminded that the procession that began on Palm Sunday did not lead to triumph and victory, but to suffering and death. But as Tony Campolo liked to say, "Ah... but Sunday's coming!" Let us be a people who choose the parade coming from the East, and those who resist the temptation to join the parade coming from the West. May we walk the way of Jesus – together – and enter the kin-dom of God, the family of God, together. Amen.