



Fickle Followers

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Matthew 21:1-11

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The Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, is the only one who is worthy. This beautiful anthem just sung by our students is based on John's vision from the fifth chapter of the book of Revelation: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation..." (Revelation 5:9). Thank you, students and Brendan, for ministering to all of us. As well, we praise our God for the report from our PNC!

Let's listen to this morning's Scripture, Matthew 21:1-11.

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.'

And he will send them immediately."⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ “Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in
the name of the Lord! Hosanna
in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Our *entire* faith comes down to the events of this week. Jesus is worthy because he was willing to become God-incarnate, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Jesus was willing to

come to earth as a *suffering* Messiah, a *needy* Lord, even as a *donkey-riding* King.

This story of Palm Sunday is familiar. But let's not relegate it to a sweet holiday in which our children wave palm branches. While Easter rightly supersedes everything, what we call Palm Sunday is far more than a mere "warm up" for the main event. Jesus *had* to get to Jerusalem to fulfill God's plan for the salvation of the world. Today is about *how* he entered, and then *what* that means for how we follow him.

Only Matthew's account, verse 10, says that Jerusalem actually *quaked* as Jesus entered. That's the literal meaning of the Greek. Our English word, "seismic," is derived from it. Three other times in his gospel, Matthew uses the exact same word: 1) when Herod heard that Jesus had been born (Matthew 2:3); 2) when Jesus died (Matthew 27:51b); and, 3) at his resurrection (Matthew 28:2a). Jerusalem is shaking. In Narnia language, Aslan is on the move.

"Who is this?" the crowds asked. The answer: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." We're reminded again of Jesus' obscure origins. The backwater village of Nazareth. No palace birth for the Son of God.

As interesting as these few facts may be, the *epicenter* of today's passage is what we can call the "Scripture within the Scripture." More than the other gospel writers, Matthew

quotes various biblical, messianic prophecies to show their fulfillment in Jesus.

Listen again to verse 5:

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Last week we mentioned the stunning archeological find of fragments from the books of Nahum and Zechariah. We don't necessarily “need” such proof to bolster our faith in the integrity of God's Word, but it *is* thrilling.

Five centuries before Jesus' birth, this is what *Zechariah* prophesied about Israel's long-awaited Messiah. It will sound quite familiar:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9).

Did you notice the difference? Matthew, in quoting this prophecy, purposely leaves out the phrase, “triumphant and victorious.”

Jesus *ultimately* was triumphant and victorious. Next Sunday we will sing with all our hearts, “Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!” But for now, we have to wait. We have to follow Jesus to Golgotha, to the Cross. We can't run from

the paradoxical truth that the way to living is through dying. And it's a crown of thorns before the royal diadem.

Who doesn't want to follow a conquering, triumphant King? We want to join in the ticker tape parade! We don't want to be on the losing side. But that is not *God's* way. We're invited to follow a humble, unpretentious King who rides a donkey.

A beast of burden carried our Burden-Bearer. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said of himself: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). This may be *the* word that our God has for you this morning.

There is a crucial fact about Palm Sunday that I only understood in recent years.

There were actually *two* different processions that final week of Jesus' life. Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east, riding down from the Mount of Olives. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, *also* entered Jerusalem for the Passover. Along with about 200,000 pilgrims, Pilate rode up to Jerusalem from the west. He did not arrive on a donkey, but on a war horse flanked by his imperial soldiers and cavalry. Pilate's commanding entrance both *symbolized and actualized* Roman power. He was there to squelch any possible uprising.

We know how this ends. The upside-down Kingdom of God will appear to lose to the power of empire. “But on the third day...”

There is a second “Scripture within the Scripture.”

We heard in verse 9: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Another prophecy is being fulfilled. This time Matthew quotes Psalm 118, the last of the *Hallel* psalms, the exact psalms Jesus was going to sing with his disciples during the Passover meal.

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar” (Psalm 118:26-27).

“Hosanna” literally means “Save now!” The throngs welcomed Jesus because they thought he would help them throw off Rome’s oppression. The disciples, as we’ve been saying throughout Lent, did not understand the kind of Deliverer Jesus would be.

So we’ve laid out *how* and *why* Jesus entered Jerusalem. What does this mean for how we can follow him?

First, we **acclaim** Jesus as the Christ, as Messiah, as Lord. To “acclaim” means to publicly and enthusiastically

praise. When a favorite team, or our *alma mater* wins, we unreservedly cheer. When an opera or musical or ballet stirs us, we respond with standing ovations. God has secured *everything we need* in Jesus Christ. A Post-it on my kitchen cabinet says this: “What I have in Christ is greater than anything I don’t have in this life.” How can you acclaim him more?

The Psalms tell us that God “inhabits” our praises (Psalm 22:3). We greatly miss worshiping together. All the more, then, how can you acclaim the Lord *right where you are planted*? Luke’s gospel account tells us that some of the Pharisees in this Palm Sunday crowd tried to get Jesus to silence his disciples’ shouts of praise. Jesus replied, “If [they] were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40).

Second, we **access** what Jesus has secured for us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Visualize his humble entry into Jerusalem. Smell it. See him surrounded by crowds at eye level touching him, calling out to him, seeking him. What you are picturing is eternally true. Jesus is constantly close, available, near. The veil has been torn. Jesus sits on the Mercy Seat. We have complete, unencumbered **access** to the throne where we are promised mercy and grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

A professor who taught at my seminary wrote this:

...no heralds at arms, no trumpet sounds, no chariots of state, no liveries, no prancing horse that a shy petitioner would be afraid to approach, no running horse that a slow-footed petitioner could not keep pace with, “but [he comes] on a quiet [donkey], that the poorest of his subjects may not be discouraged in their **access** to him.”

(Matthew Commentary, Volume 2, F. Dale Bruner, p. 355, quoting K. Stendhal, my emphasis)

And, last, we **assent** to *his* Lordship. Are we fickle or faithful in how we follow Jesus? The crowds will disperse. They will not only disperse. Many of them will do an about-face. Their cries of “Hosanna!” will give way to shouts of “Crucify him.” The events of Holy Week become increasingly grim and dark. Except for a few disciples, mostly women, all will desert Jesus as he hangs on the cross.

Let’s end as we began, with the book of Revelation. John writes letters to 7 churches. The church of Laodicea draws the short stick. That congregation, alone, is called out for being “lukewarm” (Revelation 3:15-16).

Friends in Christ, be hot, even be cold. But don’t be tepid, half-in/half-out, lukewarm. It cost our Savior too

much for us to be fickle followers of the One who gave his life so that we could live. This Holy Week, don't jump from Palm Sunday to Easter. Join us for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, so that all the more, next Sunday, we may shout and acclaim the truth that "He is Risen! He is risen, indeed!" In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

A Matthew Commentary: The Churchbook, Volume 2,
Frederick Dale Bruner.

The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem, Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan.