

Matthew 21:1-17

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

“Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”^[c]

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer,¹ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him.

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise?’” And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

INTRODUCTION

Palm Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays in the church year, especially here at Home Church. I love hearing our children lead the congregation in singing the Hosanna antiphonally. This Moravian liturgical practice comes from our Gospel reading for today where children were shouting Hosanna to the Son of David in the Temple courts. I love the creative ways that Moravians capture nuances of Scripture that can be easily overlooked.

Our Hosanna reminds us that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was part of a joyful festival that included children. Only the Gospel of Matthew includes this brief scene of the children singing, but I think it provides a valuable insight into Jesus' ministry on earth and his intention for the church.

CHILDREN

Matthew's Gospel highlights the reaction of the priests and teachers of the law to the children's joyful and playful shouting of Hosanna. Unlike our congregation this morning, the religious authorities did not follow the children's lead and sing antiphonally with the children. The adults in charge of the Temple and religious decorum were angry that children were running around the sacred precincts shouting for joy. The priests and lawyers believed that religion should always be serious. The Temple authorities acted a bit like one of my grandmothers whose glare could quell the heart of any child who dared to speak or laugh in church.

The Temple officials demanded that Jesus stop the children's singing and playing. But Jesus, as he had many times before, defended the children. Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2. "From the mouths of children and infants, Lord, you have called forth praise!" This is one of many times in the Gospels that I think we should picture Jesus smiling or even laughing as he spoke.

My granddaughter Elizabeth can only say a few simple words like no or cat. But her lack of vocabulary doesn't stop her from talking. Earlier this week she and I sat on the front porch and talked excitedly about all the wonderful things that she is discovering in the world. When the birds sang, she pointed and told me about the birds. Her incoherent babbling is one of the most joyful sounds I've ever heard. The fact that we can only guess at what she is saying does not impede her in the least. As Jesus said, "From the mouths of children and infants, Lord, you have called forth praise!"

DONKEY

I started with the end of the passage, but lets go back to the beginning. Our lesson begins with Jesus making plans to ride into Jerusalem. This is one of the few times that all four gospels agree on the basic facts such as that the disciples found a donkey for Jesus to ride. I'll point out that the gospels make it clear that this wasn't a random

decision by Jesus because he was tired of walking. The disciples didn't steal someone's donkey for him. It seems like it was all prearranged.

There was a reason Jesus chose to come into the city on a donkey. In fact, there are at least two reasons. He was fulfilling messianic prophecy but he was also making it clear that he was not entering Jerusalem as a conqueror. He was not a war lord on a stallion with his sword in hand; he was riding humbly on a donkey. In other words, Jesus was presenting himself to the people as a Messiah bringing peace instead of destruction, life instead of death, reconciliation instead of alienation. We'll come back to this point later.

PILGRIMS TO JERUSALEM

Matthew does not tell us why there was such a great crowd on the street leading into the city, and you may think they had come to see Jesus, but that's not the reason they were there. The crowd was filled with Jews from all over Judea, Babylon, and Asia Minor who were coming to the city for the Passover festival. They were making a religious pilgrimage. You may know that this coming June millions of Muslims from all around the world will make a pilgrimage to Mecca to fulfill one of the commandments of Islam.

In ancient times Jews did something similar during Passover. Thousands of people each year would travel to Jerusalem and visit the Temple to make a sacrifice and pay their Temple tax. For many, this was the event of their lifetime. While in Jerusalem they would celebrate family reunions, arrange marriages for their children, conduct business, go shopping, and a host of other things. The economy of Judea depended on the pilgrims the way some modern cities depend on tourists.

As the pilgrims walked up the hill to Jerusalem they would sing some of the fifteen psalms of ascent. These are psalms 120-134 in your Bible if you are interested. Local people would stand along the roadside or sit on top of the city walls singing the same songs. They often sang antiphonally back and forth the way we did in our liturgy. I'm sure that the antiphonal singing of the psalms was a happy chaos, much like the cheering and chanting at a sporting event. The ritual of singing brings people together.

HOSANNA

The most important word that the Passover pilgrims shouted or chanted as they entered the city gates was Hosanna. Hosanna is a joyful sounding word like Hallelujah, and I love the Andrew Lloyd Weber version of it. It is a joyful sound, but the meaning of Hosanna points to times of trial and tribulation. Hosanna literally means "O Save Us!" It is a cry to God and God's agents on earth to save the people from disaster, including the disaster of living under corrupt, dishonest, and brutal leaders. Shouting Hosanna was part of a religious tradition, but it was also a protest song like We Shall Overcome or This Land is Our Land.

This is why the rulers of Judea were always nervous during Passover. They worried about what would happen if people got overly excited. One year the Roman governor Pontius Pilate made the mistake of marching into the city with imperial banners. The people shouting Hosanna started throwing rocks at the Roman soldiers. Pilate had to flee the city because a riot was starting. He learned to respect Jewish religious customs after that.

Hosanna! God save us! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the Son of David. Blessed is the One who can restore justice, who will defend the poor and powerless. Hosanna to the one who loves mercy, does justice, and walks humbly with our God. Hosanna to the only king, the Messiah, our Lord!
Hosanna to our Lord!

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

Every year at Passover pilgrims chanted the psalms of ascent but something was different the year that Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Some of the people standing on the roadside knew who Jesus was, and they proclaimed that the famous prophet from Galilee was the Messiah, the Son of David. They spread their cloaks on the ground and swarmed around him as he slowly rode through the gates of the city and then went up the Temple mount.

Ever vigilant to threats to their power, both the Jewish and Roman authorities watched Jesus nervously. They saw that there was a bit of a disturbance around him. If they had had pepper spray and rubber bullets in the first century, they might have tried to disperse the crowd and quell the growing protest. Instead, they watched and waited to see what Jesus would do after he entered the outer courtyard of the Temple.

They watched to see if he would do what the other pilgrims did. Would Jesus observe the proper rituals as handed down by priests for centuries? Would he exchange his Galilean coins for the special coins that were used in the Temple? Would he buy a lamb or dove to sacrifice to God? Would he pay one of the priests to take the animal to the altar to drain its blood and burn its fat as a gift to God? Would he say the prescribed prayers and follow the traditions? Would he pay his temple tax?

Or would Jesus align himself with one of the religious sects that believed that the high priests were illegitimate pretenders who blasphemed and defiled the Temple with every ritual they performed? Would this messiah on a donkey denounce the high priest or do what he was supposed to do?

MONEY CHANGERS

Of course, you know what Jesus did. He overturned some of the tables of the money changers and merchants, causing a ruckus. We need to pause here because this scene is easy to misunderstand. Several months ago, someone was playing with AI on their computer. They asked for a picture of Jesus flipping over the tables in the Temple.

What he got was a picture of a man in a white robe and beard doing a backflip over a table filled with coins. It's funny and it tells us a lot about the limitations of AI, but that experience also highlights how easy it is to misunderstand the Bible.

There are a lot of preachers, influencers, and politicians in America today who are using this story to claim that Jesus Christ was a violent man who advocated violent action. They say that Jesus physically attacked people he was angry with. And then they use this image of an angry, violent Jesus to justify their own anger and violence, completely ignoring Jesus' own teachings in the sermon on the mount in this same gospel. They ignore the fact that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the fact that he did not actually start a riot in the temple.

In truth, Jesus did not cleanse the Temple and drive all the money changers out. He turned over a few tables and openly criticized the priests for turning religion into a business enterprise. Had Jesus caused a major disturbance in the Temple, he would have been arrested right then and Holy Week would have been much shorter.

I'm not trying to downplay Jesus' actions. They were bold, but symbolic actions. Jesus turned over the tables to make a point about the proper worship of God. His actions were consistent with his teachings. He wanted us to stop sacrificing animals in an attempt to please God. Jesus was acting like one of the prophets of the Old Testament, like Isaiah (11:1) who said that God was weary of people's religious festivals when they were living unjustly; or Amos (5:21) who said that God did not care about people's animal sacrifices, he cares about justice and mercy.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus taught that the true Temple is not the beautiful building built by the corrupt and violent tyrant King Herod. The true Temple is in our hearts. It is the Temple of our hearts that needs to be cleansed from greed, from over consumption, from domination, from hatred, from violence, from injustice. Jesus told the priests and lawyers and money changers that God's temple should be a house of prayer for all nations, for all people, for Jews and Gentiles, for the poor and the migrants, for laborers and the homeless, for the orphans and widows.

CONCLUSION: HEALING

And what did Jesus do after he symbolically banished the marketplace from the Temple? He healed people. The blind and the lame came to him, and he healed them. Beggars who could never buy a dove to sacrifice came and he healed them. He restored the lost and broken people through the power of his love, not through violence and hatred.

The religious authorities saw what he was doing. They saw him overturn the tables and they saw the bent and heavy laden people coming to Jesus. They saw the poor and wretched stand erect and walk away with pride and dignity. And the priests were angry. They were scared. They saw their positions of privilege being whittled away by

a Galilean prophet who believed that we worship God best when we serve God's people.

And the worst part of it was that the children continued to sing Hosanna. Children laughed and danced and played while Jesus healed and taught. That is what salvation looks like. That is what the true Messiah does. That is what a Temple or Church is for. Hosanna! Hey Sanna! Ho Sanna Sanna Sanna! Let the children sing while their elders have visions and dream of the kingdom of God. May our songs of praise be heard in the streets and across the land. Hosanna! Amen.