

Matthew 21:1-11 (The Message)

THE ROYAL WELCOME

¹⁻³ **21** When they neared Jerusalem, having arrived at Bethphage on Mount Olives, Jesus sent two disciples with these instructions: “Go over to the village across from you. You’ll find a donkey tethered there, her colt with her. Untie her and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you’re doing, say, ‘The Master needs them!’ He will send them with you.”

⁴⁻⁵ This is the full story of what was sketched earlier by the prophet:

Tell Zion’s daughter,
“Look, your king’s on his way,
poised and ready, mounted
On a donkey, on a colt,
foal of a pack animal.”

⁶⁻⁹ The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, “Hosanna to David’s son!” “Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!” “Hosanna in highest heaven!”

¹⁰ As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, “What’s going on here? Who is this?”

¹¹ The parade crowd answered, “This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Shaking the Foundations

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Matthew 21:1-11*

Palm Sunday. How are we to make sense of it? It seems such an odd and sorry story. Jesus comes into town. The crowd cheers him on, but less than a week later, they turn on him. It seems to be a sad story of the fickle human heart. Or maybe it's about the nastiness with which we respond when someone fails to live up to our expectations. Either way, it's not much of a story. So, in our church, Associate ministers have historically drawn the straw of preaching on Palm Sunday. The custom has become the butt of our staff meeting jokes. Associate ministers roll their eyes and say, "What can I say this year that I haven't said in past 150 times I've preached it? The senior minister gets Easter. There's always something new to say about Easter," the thinking goes. "But Palm Sunday. It's just the same old thing every year."

So, you see, it is quite by mistake that I'm here preaching today. Corey was ready to heroically give it a go another year, and then she fell ill. At least that's what she told me over the phone.

Now, kidding aside, Corey has been quite ill, that much is true. But she, like every good preacher, has found something fresh each year in preaching Palm Sunday, even though we do kid about it. And I must say that I am thrilled to preach a text today that I very seldom do. I am thrilled because, like every text, there is more in it than first meets the eye. And I am thrilled to have had a chance to wrestle with it this last week.

So, Palm Sunday. Jesus' enters Jerusalem for his rendezvous with destiny. All glory, laud, and honor to you, O Christ, we sing, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring! The people of the He-brews with palms adorned your way; our praise and prayer and anthems we offer you this day.

Except there's a problem. Look at verse 10 in this morning's reading: As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, "What's going on here? Who is this?"

The whole city was shaken. Matthew uses the same word at the moment Jesus died: And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. And he uses it again to describe the guards when they see the risen Christ on Easter morning: And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

The Letter to the Hebrews uses it to say that God will shake earth and heaven. And the book of Revelation uses it to describe a shaking so strong that it will shake the stars from the sky like figs from a tree in the wind.

This parade is no carnival it seems. This wind stirring is no breeze. Palm Sunday is not the calm before the storm. Already the storm is present. The whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, "What's going on here? Who is this?"

And even though we know who this is—Jesus of Nazareth, I am left with a similar

question to the one the crowd asks. What's going on here? Why was the city shaken to its foundations in the face of this rag-tag procession from the hinterlands of the Galilee?

The Biblical scholars Dom Crossan and Marcus Borg, have given us account of Palm Sunday in their recent book, *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*. They look specifically at Mark's account, but his is very similar to Matthew's. Borg and Crossan shed some light on our questions: What's going on here? Who is this?

[Quote begins] Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. ...

One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. ... They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north Mark's story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.

Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century. ...

The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts. They and Pilate had come up from Caesarea Maritima, "Caesarea on the Sea," about sixty miles to the west. Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before and after him, Pilate lived in the new and splendid city on the coast. For them, it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland and insular, provincial and partisan, and often hostile. But for the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors and successors, went to Jerusalem.

Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE. ... Inscriptions refer to him as "son of God," "lord" and "savior," the one who had brought "peace on earth." ... His successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, emperor ... during the time of Jesus's public activity. For Rome's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.

We return to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. ... it is a prearranged "counter-procession." Jesus planned it in advance. ... Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers, who spread their cloaks, strew leafy branches on the road, and shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in

the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ...

The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. "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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations. (9:10)

This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land—no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.

Jesus's procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast—between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar—is central not only to the Gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity.¹ [quote ends]

If we believe Borg and Crossan, and there is every reason to believe them, Jesus and his small band represent a counter-procession to the Roman army's procession. It represented a different kind of kingdom, God's kingdom, for the world. Two versions of the prince of peace. One enforced by the power of the world. The other said peace could never be achieved by the force of the powers of the world.

That much is clear. But why would such a small and pathetic procession carrying such a ridiculous message shake the whole city to its foundations? In fact, even according to our own story, wouldn't Jesus be easily dispatched in a matter of days? Why such a big deal?

One answer seems to be that it's just the way it was. Rome brooked no resistance of any kind. The horses and chariots and armor were not just for show. The Anchor Bible Dictionary says that Rome crucified people even for minor crimes, like theft. The crucifixions usually took place along busy thoroughfares, so that as many onlookers as possible could watch the slow and torturous death, which very often took place over several days of excruciating pain.

So, one answer seems to be that any band, even a small one, that questioned Rome at all would almost certainly unleash a horrific display of violence. And the people could rightly fear getting caught in the melee.

But that answer isn't quite enough. The crosses along the busy highways weren't there just as a deterrent. There was something about them that attracted the people, much like accidents along our highway seems to do. And an interesting further thing would happen. Even the bystanders would get caught up in the feelings of it all. From an anthropological point of view the picture we have of Good Friday, the picture of the whole city caught in the thrall of blood-lust and crying out, "Crucify him! Crucify Him!" is to be fully anticipated. Roman rule knew that the power of their violence was not limited to causing fear. In what seems an irrational turn, even those threatened by it would become captivated by the blood-frenzy.

And lest we think too quickly that all this is a plague of ancient and ignorant societies, let us confess that still the powers and principalities rule by retaliation very often out of proportion to the offenses they are punishing. And still it happens that even those in those societies those

¹*The Last Week, 2-5.*

who stand to lose the most at the hands of such retribution often support it, even say it is the will of God. So, almost certainly, already by Palm Sunday the expectation of violence on the horizon was creating in some fear and in others voyeurism and in some a strange mixture of both.

But there was something else, something else in this procession, that shook the city to its foundations, even shook Pilate and his well-armed procession. In one sense Pilate and all Jerusalem with him were as clear as a bell that power was just what it looked like. Power resided in the empire. Power resided in the military. Power resided in the ability to impose one's will with but a word or the sweep of a sword. Power was a captivating logic that held everyone in its spell. Power was as clear as a bell.

Except that it wasn't, at least not entirely, it wasn't. You may recall from my Christmas letter that I talked of Germany in 1933. Hitler was ascending to power. Already he was chancellor, soon he would also be president. Hitler sought to win the support of the church, which he did among a great majority. And even most of those who opposed wrapping the church with the cloak of the Third Reich were more interested in ecclesiastical autonomy than they were in opposing Nazi ideology. They were, for the most part, quick to say that they were true patriots and that they were supporters of the Nazi program. True power resided in the powerful. Even God thought so. It was as clear as a bell.

Except that it wasn't. Toward the end of that year, in Advent, a young theologian minister, just 28 years old, who knew that in fact power resided in a quite different place, preached a sermon on the second Sunday of Advent. It plainly contradicted the common sense that abounded around him. In it he said:

For those who are great and powerful in this world, there are two places where their courage fails them, which terrify them to the very depths of their souls, and which they dearly avoid. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No one who holds power dares to come near the manger; King Herod also did not dare. For here thrones begin to sway, the powerful fall down, and those who are high are brought low, because God is here with the lowly.²

At the manger and at the cross. Terrifying, swaying, brought low are the thrones of the powerful. For they know that the compelling story of earthly kingdom's power, of violence's power, of power's power is but a lie needing only the one humbly approaching on a donkey, needing only the one who will stare down the worst that power has to offer, needing only this one to unmask it.

Now, talk about terror. This one coming through the gates of the city shook it to its foundation. Matthew captured it exactly: As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, "What's going on here? Who is this?"

But of course, they already knew. They already knew. And they were terrified to the depths of their souls. Amen.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1935* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 345-6.