

FIRST LESSON: Zechariah 9:9
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 21:1-11
PALM SUNDAY
April 2, 2023

“The God We Need”
Sermon ©Lisa C. Farrell

One Palm Sunday, a five-year-old little boy had a sore throat and had to stay home from church with Grandma. When the rest of the family came home, they were carrying palm branches. The little boy asked what they were for, and his father told him that people held them over Jesus’ head when he walked by.

“Oh man! Wouldn’t you know it?” he complained, “The one Sunday he turns up and I’m not there!”

The gospel of Matthew tells a simple but mysterious story. The disciples were sent by Jesus into a village to get a donkey and her colt. We normally picture one animal. There’s only one in the other gospel accounts. But Matthew is more thorough and, in this version, we are told there were two, the mother donkey and her colt. It was quite normal for colts to stay with their mothers until they were nearly fully grown and for them to refuse to go anywhere without them. Anyone trying to take a colt without his mama was asking for trouble. But this colt was not traumatized, because mom went along. If asked what they were doing as they helped themselves to the animals they were to say, “The Lord has need of it.”

The disciples brought the donkey and her colt to Jesus. The prophecies they were enacting were well known. There are two scriptures blended together. The first scripture, “Say to the Daughter of Zion” is from Isaiah 62: 11. Just this one line would have brought to mind the rest of it, which is *say to the daughter of Zion, See your savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.* The second part is from Zechariah 9: 9 which we read today. *“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.”* These scriptures had been interpreted as referring to the Messiah for centuries. Jesus was not the only one to ever enact this type of dramatic entrance. But the Romans killed every would-be Messiah, and there were a number both before and after Jesus.

As the group around Jesus grew closer to Jerusalem and the road became more crowded Jesus’ followers began to shout, “Hosanna to the son of David!” Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” Others recognized Jesus and joined in. This was not simple praise; it was a request for action. This was a cry to a king for deliverance.

More than two and a half million people crammed into Jerusalem for Passover and the authorities were always on edge. It was absolutely mobbed when Jesus entered the city. Soldiers were stationed everywhere. As he crossed

through the city gates he drew the attention of more than his followers. The city, we're told, was stirred. It was like seismic activity. A ripple spread through the crowd, and people asked those who came with Jesus, "**Who is this?**" Word would have traveled quickly to those in power.

For three years Jesus had been elusive about his identity, instructing people not to say who healed them, and, with the exception of one Samaritan woman at a well, refusing to make any clear statements when asked if he was the Messiah. This time, however, his claim to be the Messiah was unambiguous, and the authorities had to act. They were always alert to political threats and rebellion, and of course they assumed that this was Jesus' goal. They assumed that he was going to call for an all-out violent overthrow of Rome. Their assumptions, of course, were wrong. Jesus came to be the king the people needed, not the one they wanted. We want the military genius. We **need** the crucified one.

The gospels seem to downplay the actions of Pilate. Poking the bear is never a good idea, and the authors may have reasoned that if these documents (i.e. the gospels) were ever found they didn't want to give the authorities more ammunition to label Christians as dangerous insurrectionists. But Pilate was known for excessive cruelty and brutality. Given how low the standard was, a leader had to be pretty depraved to be viewed as excessive by the Romans. As self-interested and duplicitous as the Jewish authorities in the Sanhedrin were, they walked a fine line with Rome. They had a definite vested interest in taking Jesus down first.

People tend to assume of others what is true of themselves. Those interested in power and wealth cannot imagine any other motivation. The corrupt see corruption everywhere. Every action they took against Jesus sprang from the basic assumption that Jesus had the same goals and values they did. They believed that Jesus wanted to remove them from power and exalt himself. And to be fair, they were also political realists. They were well aware of the way Rome thought and the way Rome reacted. Instability of any kind would not be tolerated. They assumed Jesus wanted political power which would result in chaos, and they were determined to prevent that. They watched. They waited. They sent spies. They even found a disciple who would betray him.

Prosperity gospel preachers disturb me for many reasons, but one of the main ones is this: They appeal to human greed. They play on our fears and insecurities. They offer a different God—Santa Claus, not sacrifice. We want prosperity. We want ease. We want success. We want to be liked and praised. We'd have to be pretty messed up to actively seek suffering for its own sake. But God sent Jesus as a servant king. God sent Jesus not only to rescue us from sin, but to show us in action the way God created us to live. It's not all about me. I have been put on earth to help others and work for the good of all, not to seek self-gratification and excess. Furthermore, to place my trust in the things of this world to bring fulfillment and happiness is to stand on shifting sand. What seems unshakable one day can completely crumble the next. Two years ago, the people of Ukraine could not have imagined the nightmare that was about to befall them. A week ago, the parents of three children in Nashville

who believed their children safe in a loving Christian school had no idea they would be plunged into such horrendous grief and loss. We truly do not know what the future holds. We do know, however, that no matter what evil might befall us, our God will be there with us and will ultimately make all things new. And that is why Jesus came. He came to break the chains that keep us bound and defeat death. He came to heal every tearful grieving heart, and to put every wrong right. Jesus came to be a king who transcends this world. God is the one stable force in a world that is constantly changing. Human powers rise and fall, but our God endures forever.

The God we need rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And unlike his followers, Jesus knew the suffering that lay ahead. He came anyway. He knows what we are going through and what is ahead. He is with us **all the way**. Politicians will rage. The stock market will go up and down. There will be life and death and all of the struggles in between. But our hope is not in the powers of this world to deliver us from evil and bring us peace and happiness. Our hope is in the Lord who is eternal. Amen.

Zechariah 9:9

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Matthew 21:1-11

21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “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.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ 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!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

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