

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "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." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

This is a familiar story to us, we hear it in some variation every year. We arrive at church with great anticipation, ready to joyfully cry out hosanna, ready to see the palm processional, and sing All Glory, Laud, and Honor. We call this story the triumphal entry, it is the beginning of Holy Week and we tend to celebrate it as if it is a mini Easter. I'm not saying this is wrong, I love the culture we have created around Palm Sunday too. But often, and this is true of many of our bible stories, when we have heard and read a story so often, we stop noticing what is actually happening. We rely on our memories and past experiences, which again, is not inherently bad, but over the years, important details can get lost. In my experience, one of two things happen on Palm Sunday. Either, we focus on a celebratory and perhaps a bit shallow understanding of Palm Sunday or we rush over Palm Sunday to the passion narrative.

Stories are so important to us. They help us make meaning of the world around us and of what has happened to us. The stories we surround ourselves with help shape us into who we are and who we are becoming. I like to think of old stories, like this one, as trees. Trees tend to appear like one solid mass, one undeniable presence in the world. But when we cut into a tree, we see the rings, with each ring representing who and what the tree was before. The stories we tell are often layered like this, they expand and grow and take on new meaning over the centuries. So today, I wanted to excavate some of the layers that make up the Palm Sunday story we hear each year. Not to get back to some original meaning, one true or most true version of this story, that does not exist, but to seek further understanding of how this story came to be and how it can speak to us today. While there are infinite rings in the tree of the Palm Sunday story, Matthew links this story to the prophet Zechariah, and I think that is an excellent place for us to begin.

The writing in Zechariah is from a part of Israelite history that had a lot of internal tension in addition to any external factors. The Israelites had been conquered by the Babylonian empire nearly a century prior, but now the Babylonians had been conquered by the Persian empire. Babylon had taken the Israelites into exile, had brought them to other parts of their empire, but when Persia took over, they allowed the Israelite people to return to Jerusalem. Which, to be clear, benefited the Persians in a few ways, they weren't simply being a nice empire. So during the time Zechariah is writing, the Israelites are returning to Jerusalem, they are rebuilding the temple and the city walls, and they are renegotiating what it means to be the people of Israel. They have been separated for nearly a century, they have been in community with all the other nations Babylon conquered, and with the Babylonians themselves, they also have Persian influences, and they are beginning to worry about another growing power in the region, Greece. The Israelites have returned to their ancestral home, but they aren't completely sure how to live in it anymore. Further, they aren't sure they want to. Was it worth being the covenant people of The Living God if they were allowed to be conquered anyway? It's been decades, and although they are freed from the yoke of Babylon, they are still a conquered people, still forced to swear fealty to a different empire.

But Zechariah's words to them are words of hope. He says, to you who feel forsaken by the God who was meant to care for you, a king is coming. But he is unlike any king you have seen before. He is just, and he has been delivered. He is poor like you. The Hebrew word we translate humble is *ānī* and it is the same word used throughout the old testament referring to the poor and oppressed. So this king is not necessarily humble as in meek, but he is low in status. He is also a conquered person. A conquered person who was delivered and has come to deliver the Israelites too. This king rides on the foal of a donkey because it is peace time, he has no need of a war horse. His peace destroys the tools of war. This king upholds the laws and writings from long ago, referencing the Israelite's heritage, and their status as covenant people. People who have hope in The Living God, even when it seems ludicrous to have any hope at all. If you were to continue reading this passage, you would see that Zechariah cannot conceptualize having peace without a great war to end all wars. Despite the violent imagery, Zechariah's point is that his God is coming to preserve Zechariah's people, and not just preserve them, but to ensure that they are well cared for. This is the story Zechariah is telling his people, hold on, God is faithful to us, and our king is coming.

So we fast forward about 500 years, and here we are, back in Jerusalem. The Israelites of Zechariah's time did successfully rebuild the temple, but they never did get liberated. Persia was conquered by Greece, and then Greece was conquered by Rome. God's people continued to live as conquered people, bent low by the forces around them. If you flip back to your bulletin cover for a moment, I will point out the figure behind the parade that seems to be coming from a different direction. This figure has a sword, this figure seems to be riding a horse, certainly not a small donkey. What we know from historical data is that Roman officials paraded into Jerusalem regularly during high holy festivals and celebrations. So, likely as Jesus is entering the city from the east, Pontius Pilate and a Roman military procession are arriving from the west. Which leads me to ask, what is the story Rome was telling the people of Jerusalem? I imagine the Roman story goes something like this, the emperor is the one true ruler and the Son of God. Remember how powerful we are, remember not to get too hopeful, not to get too rowdy. We are watching you. Tiberius Caesar is your savior, the only savior. There is no life for you outside that which Rome gives, and anything Rome gives can be taken away, so you better act right. This is the story told over and over again to the citizens of Jerusalem. As I said earlier, the stories that surround us help to shape us into who we are, and so did this story affect the people of Jerusalem, and all those under the yoke of Roman imperialism.

But Jesus comes to Jerusalem telling a different story. Jesus remembers the history of his people, not just what Zechariah said, but also going all the way back to Jacob in Genesis where his last words to his son are about the ruler of Judah binding his donkey's colt to the choice vine. Or going back to King David, who on his death bed bid that his son Solomon would succeed him and ride out on David's own mule. Jesus knows the rightful king of his people will arrive on a donkey. So Jesus sends his disciples to procure this donkey and the colt, and he uses a sort of ancient version of eminent domain. These animals are someone else's property, but Jesus takes them as would be expected of royalty. Through these animals Jesus is signifying that he is king both to the Romans and to the people of Israel. Now, Matthew is quoting Zechariah from the Greek translation that he had access to, which mistakes the emphasis on the size of the donkey in Zechariah for literally two animals, a donkey and its foal. None of the other gospel writers include two animals in their version of this story and many write it off as a mistake that Matthew does. I actually appreciate Matthew's inclusion. First, because as someone in bible study brought to my attention, Jesus could not have literally ridden on a baby donkey. It's just not physically possible! So now every time I read the other gospels I will be thinking about this. But Matthew is specific about the two animals, which allows Jesus to ride the donkey but keeps the foal as well to harken back to Jacob's blessing where the colt was tied to the choice vine. King over all the people of Jerusalem.

So Jesus rides on the donkey into the city, countering the military parade happening in the west. The story in my head, when I think of Palm Sunday, is that all the crowds around Jerusalem that cheer for him and wave their palm branches have come from the city to greet this king. But when I go back and read closely, I see that the crowds are processing with him. They are not lining up outside the city to watch him, but instead are people who have journeyed with him, who are a part of this parade, this march. People who have chosen to parade with Jesus because of their hope for liberation. These people have not allowed Rome's story to steal their hope. When we hear and say the word hosanna, it feels joyful. It feels fun and celebratory. In my cultural memory of this story, shouting hosanna isn't all that different from shouting go phils or go birds. Even as we closely read this story, it seems like a synonym for hooray or all hail. Three cheers for the son of David! But the word hosanna is actually two Hebrew words combined. *Yāša nā'* and the words together mean save us urgently. Save us now, Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Save us now, in the highest heaven. The people marching with Jesus are quoting Psalm 118, a psalm of thanksgiving that was often read during the passover festival, as it is associated with deliverance from Egypt. This is not really a celebratory phrase, is it? It is certainly powerful and emotional, but it is a desperate plea from those who have waited 500 years to be freed from oppression. So here Jesus is, all but announcing himself as king, marching with his followers who are asking for their own deliverance, against the backdrop of government officials doing their own parade. Jesus' processional seems almost satirical now, it is the exact opposite of Rome's in every way.

For many people in Jerusalem, this triumphal entry was not welcome. It was exactly the kind of thing Pilate and the Romans wanted to discourage. And these people remembered the story Rome had been telling all their lives, there is no hope for you except in the empire, there is no life for you except what we allow you to have. We are watching you. The word in our scripture translated as turmoil is *seiō* and everywhere else in scripture it refers to a literal shakiness, something akin to an earthquake. So while the people parading in with Jesus are filled with hope that Jesus has come to save them, the people within the city walls are quaking in fear. They wonder who this rabble rouser is. They question if his actions will bring the Romans even further down on them. They do not have a flicker or spark of hope that anyone can defeat the empire, and quite frankly, they are irritated that they can't simply get along with their day. They are not interested in risking what little they have for this supposed liberator, and they are grumpy that people can't just be satisfied by the way things are. They would rather muddle through the inequitable status quo than risk being a part of changing it. Or worse they know that this status quo benefits them, and are content to let unjust practices thrive, so long as they are safe. We often treat the Palm Sunday crowd as a monolith, and then highlight the absurdity that this crowd cheered for Jesus just a week before demanding his death. But the crowd who is with Jesus here and the crowd of people in Jerusalem are distinct. The crowd who demands Jesus' death are not fickle, they simply want their status quo back. They do not want to hear what Jesus has to say about caring for the poor and healing the sick. They are tired of him brazenly calling the Scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. How dare he! He should have more respect for them. Who wants to hear all these weird parables anyway?! It is easier to wave Jesus and his followers away as some sort of unreasonable radical group rather than engage with anything he said.

I'm really starting to sound preachy now aren't I? It would be easy to stop here and turn back toward the crowd that has hope in Jesus. To make the crowds foils for one another. But we, I, can all too often fall into similar thinking as the Jerusalem crowd. We have a story running through our minds too, one that isn't very different. Our story says that people just need to go through the proper channels. Follow the rules, written and unwritten. Life was unkind to me and I'm just fine, why do you have to make a scene about it? Dealing with this isn't my job or my problem. Being direct or loud or demanding is disrespectful, you shouldn't get your way if you act like that. Nothing is ever going to change, so why bother trying? I'm not a hero, I can't make a difference. We all think some variation of some of these things, the story is embedded within us, it has been in the air we have breathed for our whole lives. So I do not want to condemn the Jerusalem crowd, Jesus certainly didn't condemn them. Jesus understood the story they had been told, the hand they had been dealt. Jesus understood why things felt hopeless. He was not asking anyone to be a hero, nor to even join in this march. Jesus was telling a new story, or a really old story depending on how we look at it, and all he desired was for people to listen. To be open to the possibility that they could truly be liberated from death dealing imperialism. To even acknowledge that they needed to be liberated from death dealing imperialism, whether it was materially harming them or not. Notice that the crowd who has come with Jesus calls him a prophet, not a king, even though that is exactly what their words and actions mean. The crowd that we could easily label 'good' also fails to fully buy in to what Jesus is doing. Whether we identify more with the Jerusalem crowd or with the marching crowd, whether we are more likely to cry 'save us' or to turn away thinking that no one is coming, Jesus has come to tell us a different story. In Jesus' story, all are beloved, all have what they need, no one is fearful, no one is thirsty or hungry or in pain. There is no reason for violence or dominion, only true and lasting peace. As I said in the beginning, the stories we are surrounded by help shape us into who we are and who we are becoming. Can we be truly open to Jesus' story? More open than either crowd in this Palm Sunday story? Can we be open to letting it move and change us? This is the work before us. We must wrap the story of God's great and abiding love for us around our hearts so tightly, so often, that we allow God's story to break through all the other stories that are shaping us. That it changes who we are becoming, that it changes how we see our fellow humans. God's story changes the rules that humans have spent our entire existence believing, rules that are written in our DNA. Do we have the courage to let God's story take control? To believe that we are being freed? That we are being provided for?