

Come Sunday: A Narrative Lectionary-Based Bible Study

March 29, 2015- Palm Sunday (Year One)

Matthew 21:1-17

8 Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" 10 And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked. 11 The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."
-Matthew 21:8-11

Introduction

The first car I remember was my Dad's 1965 Buick Wildcat. It was a beautiful car. It had a nice light blue color to it, with those old little windows you can crank out when you didn't want to roll down the whole window. The memory that sticks in my brain was having dad driving the streets of Flint and heading to the barbershop in this wonderful car. You kind of felt a belt special riding around in the Wildcat.

It's interesting what we drive says about us.

By the time I entered kindergarten, Dad had bought a new car; a 1974 Buick Electra coupe. It was not as cool as the Wildcat. Though very few cars of the 1970s were that memorable. Dad gave the Wildcat to one of my nephews, who didn't keep the car up.

It's interesting what we drive says about us. Some people are concerned about the environment and so they buy a Prius. Others like a little muscle and go for the Mustang. Some want a lot of room so they go for an SUV. For those of us who buy cars, by them not only out of necessity, but also because we want to make a statement about who we are. Driving a BMW says something different than driving a Chevy.

Most of us know the Palm Sunday text by heart. It's something that we hear over and over. It seems a times that there isn't anything about this event that we don't know. Jesus gets on a donkey or mule or something and rides through Jerusalem with

people saying as he passes by, "Hosanna!" We will get the kids to grab a few palm fronds and parade up and down the isle of the sanctuary shout Hosanna, and we talk about how this was the highpoint of Jesus last week before Good Friday. After this, it all goes down from here. Palm Sunday seems like a weigh station to the more heady and meaningful for days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter.

But thing is, Palm Sunday is meaningful to us. This odd parade tells us something about Jesus, and something about us as well.

The Setting

One of the Greek words to remember from this text is *eseisthe*. It's from this word that we get the word seismology or seismic. In this passage it's used in verse 10, when it describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Basically, Jesus coming to town was shaking things up. *Eseisthe* is used in two other places in Matthew: "when the earth shook at Jesus' death (27:51) and when a great earthquake preceded Jesus' resurrection (28:2)."¹ Palm Sunday was the first in a series of tremors to hit Jerusalem that week.

It's also important to understand the political background of Jerusalem during this time. Jesus wasn't the only one shaking things up. This is what Lutheran pastor Ed Marquardt has to say about the town:

The revolution had started years before. We will briefly examine four dates in this rising political nationalism. It was 63 B.C., and Pompeii was the Roman general who conquered Israel, and now the Israelites found themselves again in slavery after three hundred years of freedom. The Israelites were trying to get rid of the Romans. The Jews hated the Romans for many reasons. The Romans made the Jews eat pork, which a Jew would never do. The Romans were forcing them to worship Caesar, which a Jew would never do...The Jews hated the Romans and there was a revolution going on.

Sometime about the year 6-4 B.C., the great builder, King Herod, who had rebuilt their Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, 150 feet long and 150 feet high, a magnificent temple, turned from being Herod the Builder to Herod the Killer and he ordered all boys two and under to be killed. The killer king didn't want any baby messiah being born who would grow up to be a political king.

About twelve years later, Zaduk the Pharisee led a revolution in and around Jerusalem and two thousand of his followers were killed. The Romans strung

them up; they hung them up on crosses....Would that send a message the Jewish population what the Romans do with political revolutionaries?

And then, on this Passover day, when Jesus came riding into town, there had already been thirty-two political riots ... in five years. Yes, as a young man, Jesus with his fellow countrymen had experienced thirty-two riots, six major riots per year for five years. Can you imagine thirty-two riots in Seattle, in Washington D.C., in a mere five years? And according to the Bible story for today, they were on the edge of another riot. That is, the town was ready to blow.

In other words, it was political pandemonium. It was chaos. The town was ready to blow up with any spark.²

Jesus coming to town was not simply an entry into town, it was a seismic event that would shake up the town in a way that it hadn't been shaken before.

The Return of the King

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. ²He said to them, "Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it." -Matthew 21:1-3

Jesus and the Disciples are on the outskirts of Jerusalem in a town called Bethpage. Jesus sends two of his disciples to go in town to find a donkey and a colt tied up. The text says that the acquisition of the donkey and colt was to fulfill prophecy found in Zechariah 9: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring." That said, the writer of Matthew left out a line from the prophecy: "triumphant and victorious is he." Jesus was riding on a colt with a donkey, two "beasts of burden." Riding on a donkey was sign of peace in contrast to riding on a horse, which was an instrument of war. Jesus was conveying two messages: that he was the Messiah, the King and that this king came as a servant in peace.

This public identification as king would set the stage for his confrontation with the Roman Governor, Pilate who worried that he was setting himself up as king, which was

considered a treasonous act. As Jesus died on the cross the Roman guards would mock him and make fun of even thinking he could be a king challenging Rome.

Save Us!

*⁸ Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰ And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked. ¹¹ The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."
Matthew 21:8-11*

Jesus enters Jerusalem and two crowds merge, the ones who greet him as he enters town and the other that had been following him into town. The crowd places branches in a sign of respect. They shout hosanna to the coming King. We don't hear this word much and when we do, it tends to be on Palm Sunday. Hosanna in Hebrew means "Save us, Lord." During Jesus time this words was considered a word of praise, but for the first readers of Matthew, it could also be subtly asking Jesus to save them. They had hoped to be saved from Roman rule, but Jesus would offer a much wider salvation. They saw Jesus as the Savior, but maybe not in the same way Jesus understood it.

Follow the Leader

I had the opportunity study abroad during seminary in Hong Kong and mainland China. There are a ton of stories to share, but I want to share this story about a parade. We were visiting these small villages in remote southwestern China. One day as we walked towards on such village we saw that the townspeople had lined the streets to greet us. What had started as a little walk to meet the villagers turned into a parade. We had become instant celebrities.

But maybe what was even more memorable was the fact that the people in this village, actually in every village, made us food and wanted us to eat with them. Believe me when I say that I ate so much rice, that it took a while before I wanted to eat it again. It meant a lot to them that guests were arriving and they did what they could to welcome us and make us feel at home. They didn't have much, but they gave what little they had for our enjoyment. They served us, following a king that rode on a donkey so long ago.

The story of Jesus in the last week of his life is one that we need to listen to again and again. It's not just something we have heard before, but this story, this act of service and love has made a difference in our lives.

Questions

1. Have you ever seen an important leader (mayor, governor, president)? How was it like Jesus entry? How was it not?
2. If you were Pilate, how would you think about all of this? What about as a member of the crowd?
3. How does Jesus shake things up in the Bible? What does this mean for the Church today?

Notes: 1. [Lectionary Greek](#), Rob Myallis, 2015 2. · ["What Are You Doing for Lazarus?"](#)
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