

“Who is This?”

Matthew 21.1-17

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As you may know, we’ve been following Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. Last week we were in chapter 10, the time when Jesus sends out the apostles to continue his ministry. If you remember, Jesus boldly sends them out to be his hands and feet and heart in a world that is in need of good news. And yes, the apostles have a big job - they are to be Jesus’ representatives to a world that is hurting and in pain. Jesus tells them they are not to be naive in thinking this will be easy - they, too, will face resistance and opposition, just as Jesus does in his ministry.

Today we are jumping ahead to chapter 21, Matthew’s story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and a colt - what is traditionally known as Palm Sunday. Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, and for the next six evenings we will gather to worship before we celebrate Easter next Sunday. Though our culture tells us Easter is about candy and bunnies and dyeing colorful eggs, the message of Holy Week is very different. Holy Week is a reminder that we are followers of One who calls us to deny ourselves, to pick up our crosses, and to follow him in the ways of service and love. Let us listen now to God’s Word, beginning with the first verse of chapter 21 - you may follow along in your bulletin:

Matthew 21:1-17

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.” Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’

but you are making it a den of robbers.”

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did and heard the children crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?”

Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Seven years ago this month I spent two weeks in the Holy Land. I was able to travel with a group of clergy friends, an amazing experience I would love to share with you all at some point. One week we were based in the town of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of Israel/Palestine, and the last week our base was in the capital city of Jerusalem. As you may know, up in Galilee is the town of Nazareth where Jesus grew up and spent much of his life. When Jesus began his ministry around the age of 30, he focused his ministry in the area around the great lake of Galilee - preaching and teaching and healing many people. Through his words and his deeds he proclaimed the Good News of God’s reign coming near, and in Matthew’s gospel almost all of his activity takes place in the more rural and remote parts of Galilee. In terms of Mitchell County, Galilee would be up north in Buladean - and according to Matthew, this rural setting is Jesus’ home base until the last week of his life. And when we get to chapter 21 we see that the last week of his life is spent in the capital city of Jerusalem.

So why does Jesus decide to come to Jerusalem after spending his whole life up in Galilee?

It should come as no surprise that people in the city often look down on those who live out in the boondocks - whether it's Galilee or Buldaean, there can be an air of suspicion or a feeling of superiority. Certainly it would have been easier and safer for Jesus to just stay away. But Jesus has been talking with his disciples about the importance of coming to Jerusalem for some time. As Bible scholar Tom Long ([*Matthew Westminster Bible Companion*](#), p. 233) puts it, though this is “Jesus’ first appearance in Jerusalem, the city has been looming... on the horizon since the beginning. Twice Jesus has told his disciples that Jerusalem will be the place where he will suffer and die, and also the place where he will be raised from the dead (16.21; 20.18).” At the beginning when the Wise Men ask King Herod about the child “who has been born king of the Jews” (2.2) the whole city of Jerusalem shook with fear (2.3). And Jerusalem will be shaken by an earthquake when Jesus dies on Good Friday (27.51-54). It should come as no surprise that when Jesus enters Jerusalem in today’s reading, we have another seismic moment. Upon his arrival the whole city is in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” (21.10). So this morning I invite you to consider with me what we can learn about this Jesus who chooses this path - and what we can learn about the calling he gives us to be his followers.

This weekend I attended a celebration at my alma mater, the inauguration of the new President of Davidson College. As I was sitting in a folding chair in Belk Arena, the long

procession of faculty and staff and other dignitaries reminded me of the Palm Sunday procession. Back in Jesus' day, when important leaders came into town, the people would go out to the city gates to greet them. Whether it was a conquering general or another representative of the Roman Empire, people would make a big deal welcoming the celebrity. Waving tree branches and putting down cloaks on the road were signs of respect, much like we love waving flags in a 4th of July parade as we wait for the honored ones to come by. In today's passage it's very clear that Jesus is coming into Jerusalem as the new king, the son or descendant of King David, and right from the start we see him exercising his authority. Jesus sends two disciples to secure his transportation, not fetching one but two animals on which he will ride. And like Matthew does time and time again, the emphasis is on how everything that is happening with Jesus is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. This time the reference is to the prophet Zechariah who said centuries beforehand "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9).

At the inauguration at Davidson the new President, Doug Hicks, was welcomed by important dignitaries - Senator Thom Tillis gave his greetings, as well as a Congresswoman Alma Adams from Charlotte, the mayor of Davidson and other persons in authority. But notice that when Jesus gets into town, he has no such reception by important people, by the dignitaries of his day. While the crowds are cheering him on, we are told that Jerusalem - the capital city, the political and religious center of Israel - the whole city instead is in turmoil because of Jesus. While the crowds are shouting, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee," the whole city is in shock, wondering "Who is this guy?!" Like King Herod who knew that the birth of a messiah could be a threat to the Roman occupation, those in power certainly are afraid that this new king could start a revolution.

During Holy Week we will see how the Empire will play into the drama of Jesus' arrest, conviction and execution. But today we also see Jesus coming into conflict for the first time with the leaders of the Temple, the so-called chief priests and scribes. You see, Jesus was never one to shy away from things. Instead of taking a break to eat or drink at the best diner in town, and then making a royal speech about his agenda as the Messiah, Jesus does something surprising - he marches straight into the temple area and he drives out all who were selling and buying in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves to be used as sacrifices.

Why would Jesus do such a thing right when he entered the city? Traditionally, the answer has been that Jesus was exercising righteous anger at the money changers who were exploiting the travelers who came to the temple to make sacrifices. With the Passover celebration people from around the world would come to the Temple, and they needed to exchange their currency to buy the animals to sacrifice. I can understand that human greed can always be a factor when people are exchanging money, but I think there's more going on here. In giving an explanation of his actions, Jesus quotes the Hebrew scriptures: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of robbers." Quoting both the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus calls out those who exploit the poor and the marginalized, the widows and the orphans and the aliens.

Instead of being a house of prayer where all can have direct access to God's presence, the Temple has become a place of exploitation and exclusion. Under the current system the poor would have to pay taxes to the temple as well as pay for the doves, the cheapest option for a sacrifice. So many of the poor and marginalized were cut off from the temple, as they did not have the resources to play the game. By quoting [Jeremiah chapter 7](#), Jesus reminds us of the hypocrisy of those who lie, cheat and steal six days a week but then come to the temple thinking that their sacrifices will make up for their misbehavior (Jeremiah 7.8-10). I know that we, too, as Christians can fall into that same temptation - following the ways of the world and then sliding into church occasionally on Sunday, thinking that our participation will make us safe (Long, p. 237). If you wonder why we have the prayer of confession each and every Sunday at the beginning of worship, it's because we are prone to miss the mark time and time again. And no matter how much we try, we can fall into old patterns and rationalize our sinful behaviors.

But the Good News my friends is this: here in the temple Jesus shows us a different way. After turning over the tables and driving out those selling doves and making exchanges, look who shows up! The blind and the lame come to Jesus in the Temple, and he cures them. The children show up, too, singing "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Though we love and value kids in our world, children were once considered to be nobodies, always at risk of dying young and thus were social equals to slaves (Long, p. 204). But Jesus was a revolutionary in that he welcomed and affirmed children as models of faith (18.1-5). And this is what really makes the religious leaders mad! Jesus welcomes into the temple those who were not allowed there - the blind and the lame (Leviticus 21.18) and now the children, too. In this way, through his words and in his deeds, Jesus threatens the whole religious establishment of the day. It is no wonder why the religious leaders of his day wanted to silence him in the only way they knew how, through the humiliating death on the cross. A messiah who comes riding on a humble donkey was one thing - but a revolutionary who would turn the Temple sacrifice system on its head was another!

On this Palm Sunday, I know I am giving you a lot to think about. No matter how hard we try, Palm Sunday has never been about a cute parade with palms and a donkey ride - instead, it's an invitation to enter into a Holy Week full of tension and betrayal, violence and death. Yes, a week like no other that turns the whole world upside down. And as God's people we are invited to be the church to a world in need of good news, in need of healing and wholeness. Bible scholar Tom Long puts it like this:

... when Christians live as people of mercy and peace, forgiveness and righteousness, prayer and justice, it allows the world to see the surprising ways of God and to draw near. The sign of a faithful church is that the hurting and bruised of this world - "the blind and the lame" - are healed and those whom the world counts of little value - "the children" - are gathered to sing praises to the Son of David. (Long, p.238)

May it be so this day and evermore!

Amen.