

You Call this Blessed? (Matthew 21:1-11)

It's funny. Growing up, I was taught not to say, "Man, that was lucky." I learned that luck isn't something that happened in a world where God calls the shots, having hung the stars and spun the planets into motion.

Luck assumes chance is lurking at the edge of the existential forest. But many people in my young life believed that God has a plan, that everything happens the way it happens because God **wants** it that way. That was why we were supposed to be comforted when something bad happened. It's all in God's plan.

It wasn't bad **luck** that your uncle Eddie stepped in front of a bus. It was all a part of God's grand design.

It wasn't by chance that you woke up the day of your prom with a zit the size of a small Volkswagen on your nose. God was busy shaping the world according to some master blueprint to which

you had no access—at least in a “big picture” kind of way—one where, apparently, you having a massive pimple on prom night is a part of the through line of the plot.

That boss at work? The one who studied leadership at the Hitler School for Business Executives? Yeah, that’s God too.

(Well, I mean, **that’s** not God—in the sense that your boss is **free** to act like an unreconstituted jerk. **God’s** hand is in it in putting you together with your mentor in suffering. Pairing you with a Ph.D. in pettiness, self-importance, and passive-aggressive management skills allows God to **test** you. Or it could be God working to make you more **patient**. Or it could be God looking to discipline you for cheating your way through high school calculus. Whatever it is, rest assured, God’s got a reason.)

I don’t think it was my parents. But I learned somewhere that luck isn’t something Christians believe in.

Christians don't get lucky. They're blessed.

Blessed. See, now that sounds way better, doesn't it? So much more intentional. God's got it under control.

Plus, being "blessed" sounds more positive. Whereas luck and chance can be good or bad—blessing sounds like you've hit the jackpot, right?

(Except, of course, Christians don't hit literal "jackpots"; that would imply games of chance, which Christians don't do. But don't worry. Even ministers understand you getting a piece of the Powerball. I mean, let's not get too ecclesiastically nit-picky.)

No. Blessing **sounds** good, doesn't it? Nice family. New job. Voted most likely not to ruin Twitter by your Harvard MBA class. Blessed.

Has it ever occurred to you that blessing doesn't seem to work in the ***opposite*** direction?

"Sorry to hear about your brother, Kevin. What, is this his third stretch at Eddyville for armed robbery?"

"Well, we consider ourselves blessed."

Our weird relationship to blessing makes this Sunday—heck, all of Holy Week—so odd in the church's life. Think about what happens in our Gospel this morning.

Just before our text, Jesus, who's got his ear to the political ground, has just predicted his death for the third time. Jesus has an exchange with the mother of James and John—who demonstrates a shocking inability to grasp what Jesus is all about by asking Jesus if her boys can be vice-president and Secretary of State in his new administration. Afterward, Jesus heals two blind men.

Now, the healing of the blind men is what we call in literature irony: Jesus heals two blind men amid a bunch of folks who demonstrate their continued blindness by failing to understand what he's all about. This irony becomes more important as we move to the story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

David Henson [suggests](#) that what we call the "triumphal entry" was political theater, or perhaps, better, "theater of the absurd." According to Henson, in entering Jerusalem as a conquering general on the back of a colt, Jesus staged the first #Resistance demonstration.

"Wait, what? How do you figure that?"

Henson [writes](#) that "during the Jewish celebration of Passover, there would typically be a Roman military parade to remind the sometimes rowdy and rebellious peasants to know their place and the consequences of a zealous revolt. On horseback, through the

front gate, the Roman officers or client rulers would ride and march.”

Henson [suggests](#) that Jesus intended “to make a public mockery of the government, and no one in his audience could have mistaken it as they laid palm fronds on the ground to celebrate his path. His entrance into Jerusalem was a slap in the face to Caesar and his Roman client rulers in the area.”

Messiah, right?

I mean, that’s what everybody’s looking for—someone to throw off the bonds of oppression.

But Jesus, the subversive, blows into town looking like something out of a Marx Brothers movie. Nobody in this growing band of eager revolutionaries expects what’s happening right in front of their noses.

This is a messiah with a cigar and shoe polish for a mustache.

In Judea, everyone grew up knowing what Messiah meant. A messiah was a political/military leader anointed by God to rise up and throw off the shackles of foreign oppressors.

Someone in the mold of King David, capable of rallying the troops and reestablishing Judean pride—someone like the Persian king, Cyrus, who overthrew the Babylonians and restored Judah to its homeland, helping to pay for the temple to be rebuilt.

Someone like Mattathias Maccabees, who rose up and overthrew Antiochus IV and the Greeks with a ragged band of freedom fighters, engineering guerilla raids from the Judean outback. The Maccabean revolution was less than two hundred years before Jesus; that victory—one of the sweetest in the history of God's people—was still fresh on everybody's mind.

However, the occupying forces weren't Babylonian or Greek—they were Roman. So what Judea needed was ***another*** hero, someone to whip the people into a religious/patriotic frenzy—someone to finally kick the Roman interlopers right out of Palestine. They needed, in short, a messiah acquainted with the business end of a sword and the will to use it.

So, you can imagine that when Jesus starts talking about humiliation and death as ***his*** vision of messiahship, how it is that so many people can't hear him. They misunderstand ... utterly.

By the time Jesus gets to Jerusalem, political tensions are high—especially because the Passover feast celebrated Israel's liberation from bondage at the hands of another dictator. And right on cue, folks are starting to get that old Maccabean feeling again. The peasants are getting restless, sensing that something big's about to go down.

"We've got to get these Roman knuckle-draggers out of our country! This is our time!"

Jesus could light the fuse to the powder keg. Just one tiny spark. That's all it would take.

"We could make this happen!"

Back in chapter 16, when Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was, and Peter answered, "The Messiah," you can see how it might be that when Jesus redefined Messiah as the **receiver** of violence rather than as its **perpetrator**, why Peter rebuked Jesus.

You can see why the mother of James and John had been thinking about her sons' new positions on the other side of the insurrection. They've been there since the beginning. They deserve plum positions after the new regime finally gets the offices that the folks in the inner circle have had their eyes on.

People seem to be getting the same sense that something big is about to happen. So they gather in the streets as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem, laying down branches in the road and shouting, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

The time is ripe for revolution. Jesus even makes his way straight to the temple immediately following our text for this morning. Perfect. The temple is the ideal place to incite a revolution! Symbolically, it’s pitch-perfect for a revolution—especially during the Passover festival.

What does Jesus do when he gets there, the crowd ready to take to the streets at his command? Does he pick up the megaphone? Start leading chants?

Does he launch into a stirring “Make Judea Great Again” speech necessary for rallying the base to insurrection, or at least for fortifying the weak spirits of the dubious?

What happens when he gets to the temple?

Jesus kicks over the tables of the payday lenders, calling them thieves. Then, Matthew tells us, he starts dispensing a little free healthcare, healing the “blind and the lame,” after which he heads out to Bethany, trying to get back to the hotel before Happy Hour is up.

Huh?

Jesus goes to the temple to start a revolution. Only the revolution Jesus starts doesn’t sound revolutionary at all. It sounds excruciatingly anti-climactic, at best—and suicidal, at worst. He’s going to overthrow the occupying powers, using a baby donkey for a charger?

He's got no army. He's got no generals. He's got no swords. Just a handful of guys named Chico, Zeppo, and Harpo.

How does he expect to win a war that way?

And this is precisely the problem we run into with blessing. It's easy to be fooled into thinking we know what blessing means—it means good, flourishing, conquering, hitting the jackpot. Right?

When the protestors in the street start shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," they know exactly what blessing looks like; it looks like a thumb in the eye of their Roman overlords.

That's right! Heap blessing on him. Crown him king.

But here's the thing: The blessing they're calling for on Sunday—whether it's military victory or street theater that laughs the Romans off the stage—looks like a curse by Friday.

No matter how you slice it, blessing for Jesus (and those who would follow him) is always a mixed bag.

Easter is undoubtedly a victory. But on Palm Sunday, the path to that victory looks quite a bit different—it starts filled with glory and songs of heroic deeds. Triumph and military conquest are on everyone's mind.

Nobody understands on Palm Sunday that to call for God's blessing is to ask to storm the gates of Hell on Good Friday.

It's hard to fathom that Easter victory comes through Good Friday defeat.

But it is for precisely that reason that Christians have the courage to speak on behalf of all those “lost causes”—because we’re not under the impression that we have to **win**. Instead, we seek justice and peace for those who’ve lived so long without it, not because we believe that somehow we’ll stamp out injustice and violence on our own, but because we know that the world needs people who follow Jesus to live like **he** lived—regardless of whether or not we’re privileged ever to see the final results of the world we believe God has promised.

We heal the sick; we bind up the broken-hearted; we comfort the grieving; we pick up the downtrodden; we fight for justice ... not because it makes for good strategy, but because we follow Jesus, which means we’re prepared to walk with him down any dark alley he enters—in search of those the rest of the world would just as soon leave behind.

We do it because it’s right. And because God loves us enough not to let us stay where we are, because **we’re** the blessed who

come in the name of the Lord, and because we don't know how to do anything else.

Those who follow Jesus have a weird way of looking at blessing. We see blessing as a struggle, as the courage to fight in the face of almost certain defeat, the determination to look death in the eye without turning tale and running. Blessing almost always looks different from what we expected.

One of my parishioners, when I was a pastor down in southeastern Kentucky, contracted bone cancer. Lorraine was an elder in the church, a dear sweet woman who, after I got out of seminary, would come by my office every so often, hand me \$20, and tell me to "go make a memory."

So, when she told me she had cancer, I was distraught. We all were, really. How do you come to terms with that kind of sadness and fear? We were afraid. We didn't want her to die. She meant so much to us.

Lorraine suffered excruciating pain with this form of cancer. Any kind of movement at all shot lightning bolts through her system.

As she neared the end of her journey, she was in the hospital when she had a heart attack. Nobody knew until the nurse entered her room and found her lifeless body on a radiology table, awaiting a test.

Lorraine didn't have a living will, so they shocked her back to life. Only, they had no idea how long she'd lain there without oxygen, so the doctors didn't know what kind of "life" she'd been brought back **to**.

It wasn't good. She never recovered consciousness.

She lay in the bed with a permanent grimace on her face. Pain. There was so much pain. Even in unconsciousness, you could see the suffering written in the contortions on her face.

One afternoon, her daughter, Barbara, called me worried that her mom had undergone some changes—shallow breathing, her feet were cold. I raced down to University of Tennessee Hospital in Knoxville.

When I got to the room, Lorraine still had that grimace of pain. I sat down. Barbara and I didn't say much. We just listened to the labored breathing.

After an hour or so, I looked up, and Lorraine's face relaxed. The grimace was gone.

That's when it happened. I saw death come to claim Lorraine.

Death tip-toed in, scooped her up, and left. Her cancer-wracked body lay still. Her face now calm.

We'd been afraid of him for so long—so scared of what he would take from her, from us.

But when he walked through the door of University Hospital, Death, like everybody else in the place, had on a name tag.

I'd never seen his proper name before, but when he came for Lorraine, the name Death wore was "blessing."

Whatever God's "plan" is, one thing's for sure: If you're blessed to go forth in the name of the Lord, you won't make it out alive.

On the other hand, people who celebrate Easter have a funny habit of calling that "blessing."

—Amen.