

“In Jerusalem”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 14, 2019

Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 21:12-22

By ancient standards Jerusalem was a significant, but not a massive city, with a regular population of about 25,000. During festivals the population could double or triple, and so the Romans would bring in additional security; especially so during the Passover – the celebration of Israel’s deliverance from captivity. Thus, the season brought crowded and somewhat tense conditions to the city. The triumphal entry of Jesus and his demonstrations at the Temple on Palm Sunday are best understood in this context: Jesus enters the city during stressful time and with revolutionary undertones. Matthew writes the story as if the whole city was disrupted and everyone in the city could see what he was doing.¹

Too often, we picture this entrance into Jerusalem like the spectacle shown on T.V. prior to an awards show, where arriving celebrities are given the red-carpet treatment. We imagine a pathway for Jesus lined with cloaks and palm trees and throngs of cheering fans. But we also are given the image of Jesus riding on a young donkey, likely with his feet scraping the ground as the tiny colt lumbered along the road. He is not going to a black-tie reception, but on his way to a head-to-head confrontation with the religious leaders of his day. It is a confusing, disconcerting day in Jerusalem; one full of irony and swirling emotions; a day of contrasts between momentary triumph and foreboding tragedy.

Fleming Rutledge tells of a sign hung one spring in a greeting card shop that read: “We make Easter easy,” likely because they would provide one-stop shopping for all the chocolates, flowers and cards you might need. That’s exactly how we prefer it to be, Rutledge comments, we want a bright and cheery Easter without all the messiness of the cross.²

After all, Jesus did not have to go to Jerusalem, even for the Passover. His friends, the disciples, tried to talk him out of it. They know that there were risks, that the Roman officials would be on high alert; frankly, they were afraid for Jesus’ and their own safety. But Jesus is determined to go; Palm Sunday represents a defining day in Jesus’ life – the day when he says “yes” to what he believes God

¹Greg Cary from *WorkingPreacher.com*

²As told by John Buchanan, “What We Believe about Jesus: His Example”

wants him to do and to be; the day when he decides to seek and follow God's will – not in the safety of the Galilean hillsides, but in the crowded, holy city. This is where he would live out his deepest passions and love – not in the quiet of personal prayer and meditation, but in the loud, dangerous streets of Jerusalem.

The first place that Jesus goes after entering Jerusalem is to the Temple. There, he finds what any pilgrim could expect to find during a festival – the bustling of religious and economic activity. There are animals being sold for sacrifice and financiers who, for a small fee, would exchange money brought from foreign lands into coinage that could be used in Jerusalem. This is the mess that Jesus seems determined to clean up. By turning tables over and throwing people out of the outer courtyard, Jesus is not just trying to create havoc or draw attention, he is building a new temple out of his words and deeds.

Jesus justifies his provocative action with a quote drawing from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer?’ But you have made it a den of robbers.” Over time, the Court of the Gentiles, which should have been a place of prayer, had been turned into a marketplace to sustain the sacrificial system which financially supported the Temple and its priesthood. Jesus will not accept temple business as usual if it denies access to God's grace for those who could not afford to purchase animals to sacrifice; or were banned from the Temple because they themselves were considered impure.

Once upon a time, there was a king who wanted to give his country a new lease on life. He decided to capture a city that none of his people had lived in before, and make it his capital, so that no one would boast because their city had been chosen, or feel excluded because it was someone else's.

The problem was, the city was perched high up on a rocky crag, and was very easy to defend against attack. The inhabitants of the city saw the king coming with his army, and knew they would have no trouble warding him off. So certain were they that they sent the king a message: *all the regular guards have gone off duty. We've placed the blind on watch and told the lame to take messages – they'll do the job all right!*

But the king knew that however strongly a city was built on a hill, it still needed one thing: water. He had found where the spring of water rose; that would be the way in. So he gave his men a challenge: get up the water shaft and fight your way in. The first one up will become a general. So, up they went and took the city. And it indeed became the new capital.

But the king didn't forget what the locals had said about the blind and lame keeping them out. So he made a rule: no blind and lame would be welcome here. No reminders of the mocking of the enemy.

This king was King David; this city was Jerusalem; and the house where the blind and the lame were not welcome was what would become the Temple. This story is told in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. And it gives a clue to what Matthew does in telling the story about how the new king, Jesus, comes to Jerusalem and to the Temple a thousand years later.³

Immediately after Jesus cleanses the Temple, we are told that the blind and the lame come to Jesus at the Temple, and there he heals them. In addition, we hear, children are heard crying out 'Hosanna to the Son of David' – much to the surprise and chagrin of the chief priests and the scribes. Thus, the people who had been kept out for centuries are now welcomed in; and the ones who no-one listens to are heard offering praise. The Temple had been turned into a place of exclusion and privilege; but Jesus' words and actions reveal the coming of a new Temple: one of acceptance and inclusion for even the young, the poor, the blind and the lame.

Two thousand years later, as Tom Long puts it, "The sign of the faithful church is where the hurting and bruised of the world – the blind and lame – are healed and those whom the world counts of little value – the children – are gathered in to sing praises."⁴

We're told by Matthew that after this encounter in the Temple, Palm Sunday comes to a close with Jesus returning for the night to Bethany, where the triumphal procession had begun earlier in the day. But the next morning, he returns to the city of Jerusalem.

On the way, we are told this strange tale about the fig tree: Jesus is hungry and looking for something to eat, but when he sees that the fig tree has no fruit, he curses it so that it withers and will never bear fruit again. While Jesus could potentially come across looking impetuous and destructive, not to mention ecologically insensitive, we can assume that this is not a story of Jesus dragged by hunger into an impulsive tantrum, but a parable of God's judgment.

We have encountered several of these parables over the past few weeks, since we have been looking ahead to Jesus' holy week teachings from chapters 22 to 25 of Matthew: stories such as the parables of the wedding banquet, the ten

³ As told by Tom Wright in *Matthew for Everyone*, vol. 2, p. 70-1

⁴ Tom Long, *Matthew* from Westminster Bible Commentary, [. 238

bridesmaids, and the sheep and goats. The lesson of these stories is that we are not to judge between who is righteous or unrighteous, loved or rejected, saved or unsaved – that is God’s job. Our job is to act with compassion, justice and mercy; to use the gifts and talents we are given for the common good. Instead, our job is to be ready and watching for signs that God is at work in our midst; and to accept that God is working in and through even those who are different from or unfamiliar to us.

Being familiar with Old Testament references – such as this story told about King David and the conquest of Jerusalem – Matthew’s first readers would have recognized the reference to a fig tree with no fruit not just as an unlucky plant that was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but as another symbol for Jerusalem; the city that becomes barren when God’s own people resist what God is doing in the world. In this city, three days later, Jesus will be arrested and then brought to trial on charges of sedition – disrupting the status quo. Allowing the blind and the lame to enter the Temple; welcoming and listening to children; supporting the poor and eating with sinners; all of these things grew too much for the Jewish religious establishment – working in concert with the Roman occupiers – to take. Who was Jesus to say that Jerusalem – the holy city, God’s house of prayer – was bearing no fruit?

But in true ironic fashion, Jesus tells his disciples that not only could the fig tree wither, but the entire mountain – the whole city of Jerusalem – could be lifted up and thrown into the sea if – and only if – we trust enough in God to pray. No matter what we ask, if consistent with the words and deeds of Jesus, will be done. For, we believe, even the rejected will be accepted; even the silenced will be heard; and even one who dies will be given new life. Thanks be to God.