

After the Ride
Matthew 21:1-17
April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday

Friends, it's Palm Sunday. You all know the story. . . Jesus commands his disciples to get a donkey, untie her and bring her to him. By the way, despite what Matthew says, I don't believe there were two animals, both a donkey and her colt. Both Mark and Luke only refer to the colt; Matthew's reference to two animals is the result of a misinterpretation of writings of Zechariah, but I'll leave the details of that for another time. Anyway, the disciples bring the donkey colt, and Jesus rides down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley and up the Temple Mount into Jerusalem. All along the way an enthusiastic crowd gathers waving palm branches and shouting

Hosanna to the Son of David.
Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

You know the story.

Those of you who were here last Palm Sunday may remember that I stated this ride was a direct contrast to the ride of Pilate, the Roman Governor. Scholars tell us that, on the Sunday before the Passover, Pilate would have been coming into Jerusalem, from his seaside home in Caesarea, coming in riding a big white horse with a whole entourage of soldiers and attendants, coming to Jerusalem to ensure that the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome would prevail during the Jewish Passover Festival when thousands of Jews would be coming into Jerusalem to celebrate. So, as Pilate was arriving from the West in glorious splendor, Jesus was arriving from the East riding a humble donkey amid the shouts of the common people of Judea. Indeed the scene provides quite a contrast; and sets the stage for the confrontation that would follow later in the week.

But today. . . today I'd like to consider what happened after the ride. The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus made three trips into the temple during that last week of his life. Matthew is not quite as clear about this, but Mark tells us that, by the time Jesus arrived atop the Temple Mount, it was quite late, so he went into the temple, looked around at everything and returned to Bethany for the night. The next morning, call it Monday morning, he went back to the temple, and here Matthew joins Mark in reporting what we traditionally call "the cleansing of the temple." Jesus overturns the tables and the chairs of the money changers and those who sold pigeons; and he quotes the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah: "My house shall be called a house of prayer" but you have made it a den of robbers. By the

way, Mark quotes Isaiah 56:7 exactly: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.” and I really don’t want to lose that “for all nations,” even though Matthew apparently does. Indeed I make the claim that the Gospel of Mark is all about inclusiveness. Jesus came to Earth for all nations, for all people, not just for the Judean Jews.

So what’s Jesus doing with this show of force, with what we might even call a show of violence? Certainly causing a ruckus in the temple was not a way to gain popularity with the establishment. So what was going on? In short, some privileged people were using the customs and the laws of the Jewish temple for their own personal gain. First, there are the money changers. You see, the common money of the first century was, of course, Roman. However, money paid in the temple offering, including the temple tax, and yes Jews were assessed a “tax” to provide for the significant operation of the temple; but money coming into the temple needed, by Jewish law, to be temple coinage, not Roman coinage. So some thoughtful entrepreneurs were happy to set up a table in the temple courtyard to exchange Roman coinage for temple coinage with, of course, a very healthy commission charged for the service.

Then there were the pigeons and doves. It was expected that the good Jew would bring an animal to the temple for sacrifice. The wealthy would bring a sheep or maybe a goat, or if they were really well off, maybe even a cow. But for the common person, the sacrifice would more likely be a pair of pigeons or doves. So, again, those looking to make a buck would set up a table and sell pigeons and doves, at a price that poor people could just barely afford. Some have even suggested that the temple authorities may have been in cahoots on this, such that the same birds might have been resold multiple times.

In short, “the money changers” were using Jewish law for personal gain at the expense of the nation’s poor. I wish I could tell you that doesn’t happen today. I pray that the United Methodist Church is not party to such behavior. Regrettably, there are certainly some churches and some pastors who call themselves Christian that do try to get the last penny from certain of their followers by preaching what has been called “the prosperity gospel,” basically saying, “Give to our ministry and you will be rewarded.” Friends, while I do believe that Jesus does call us to make certain sacrifices, I don’t believe for a minute that he wants us to suffer or go hungry. Such behavior is not in keeping with the love of Christ.

Did you notice, immediately after the Temple Cleansing, we read of healing the blind and the lame; and the people were shouting “Hosanna, to the son of David.” Indeed the shouts of the Palm Sunday Ride continued on into the temple. What’s going on?

Palm Sunday, the ride, the temple cleansing, the healing – it's the confirmation. The temple is not what is important. In 70 AD the temple would be destroyed by the Romans, never to be rebuilt; and, in fact, Jesus predicts that temple's destruction just a few verses after "the temple cleansing." The Jewish Law is not most important, certainly not when it's used for personal gain at the expense of others.

So what is important? The Kingdom of God is important, the kingdom that is ushered in by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can bring sight to the blind; and I'm not speaking of physiology; I'm speaking of light to those who walk in darkness. I'm speaking of Spiritual enlightenment to those who have been searching in the dark. Only Jesus can make the lame walk. Again, I'm not speaking of physiology. I'm speaking of walking in "the way," walking in the way of Christ, the way that leads to peace and joy and love.

Palm Sunday and the Temple Cleansing that follows is all about who Jesus is. Palm Sunday and the Temple Cleansing usher in Holy Week, because it's our confirmation that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the World, no not just the Savior of the rich, not just the Savior of the elite, not just the Savior of the clergy, not even just the Savior of the Jews; but the Savior of all the World, and every last person in it. May we never forget the saving grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray . . .

Holy Lord Jesus,

As we enter this Holy Week,
 may we remember that you are our Savior.
You are indeed the Savior of the World.
May we be reminded that your love surrounds us,
 not just this day, but every day of our lives.
And may we live lives shaped by that love,
 this day, this week, and even forever more.
Amen.

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