

A Narrative 32, 2019
April 14, 2019
Palm Sunday
Poulsbo
Pastor Alison Shane

Matthew 21:1-17

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus enters Jerusalem mounted on a donkey, accompanied by hails and shouts of Hosanna! When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” (because all the residents would have understood this ride as a declaration of kingship, but they would have also been confused, because a donkey is too humble for a king). The crowds in the parade were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

I kind of wish Palm Sunday were at the beginning of Lent instead of here, at the beginning of Holy Week. Palm Sunday placed here reminds us that when Jesus enters Jerusalem this time, he is on his way to the cross. But what we lose then is the narrative of what happens between the two events, between this triumphal entry and the cross. Because it seems really sudden for the crowds to go from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify him!” in less than a week.

But in Matthew, a lot happens in between. Jesus does a lot of stuff, says a lot of stuff. And we heard much of it in the last few weeks of Lent, but then the stories are out of context. *This* is the context.

Jesus is on his way to the cross.

Jesus is claiming kingship by riding in on a donkey, as described by the prophet.

The crowds are on board. They’ve seen what Jesus can do; they’ve seen him heal, they’ve seen him raise a little girl from the dead. As early as the sermon on the mount, they’ve been hearing his words of comfort, of blessing, of restoration and life. He has shown himself to be a healer, a wise teacher, a prophet from God. And the message he has brought has been good news to those who hear little good from God, the church, or society.

And this day they are on his side. They are with him. And suddenly, everything changes. His entrance puts the whole city of Jerusalem into turmoil, with everybody asking, “Who is this person riding in in procession as if he’s a king, but on a donkey?” Jesus puts the temple into turmoil, overturning tables and driving out all who were selling and buying animals for sacrifice. And Jesus puts the chief priests and scribes into turmoil by insinuating that the children’s praise of Jesus *is* praise of God, because that’s blasphemy.

And *then*... Jesus starts teaching again. And now his words, far from being words of healing, of comfort, of blessing, his words are words of judgment, even condemnation. They are words of caution, keep awake, of threat of the outer darkness.

His parables become scary: the wedding banquet, thief in the night, unfaithful servant, unprepared bridesmaids, misspent talents, the sheep and the goats.

He goes up against the chief priests, the Pharisees, the scribes, and even the Sadducees in debates, and he shows them up. He disses the scribes and the Pharisees, calling them out in front of great crowds of people. He causes them to lose face, to lose *honor*, which is a culturally criminal offense.

He warns of liars and false messiahs and false prophets. Instead of “blessed are they,” his speeches are filled with “woe to them.”

Jesus is bringing turmoil, causing chaos.

Because proclaiming freedom for the oppressed is only half the job. Now it’s time to bring down the structures that cause the oppression. It’s time to bring down the people who benefit from the status quo and thus perpetuate oppression. Jesus is bringing chaos in order to bring a new order. Jesus is tearing down humanity’s walls in order to build the kingdom of God. And they are going to kill him for it.

Jesus is tearing down humanity’s walls in order to build the kingdom of God. A place where the last are first and the first are last. A place where the oppressed are beloved and the powerful are shown to be in error. A place where God walks among mortals bringing healing and wholeness and life. A place where death brings life.

And in order to do that, in order to establish this kingdom, this new, scary Jesus aims this vitriol at the powers that be. He is an advocate for everyone else, all those NOT sitting on a cushion. Which means that *we* can read these chapters from the perspective of one whom Jesus is protecting. We can hear these proclamations and cheer for Jesus, because we have been claimed as children of God through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection.

It also means we need to read these chapters from the perspective of one facing the pointy end of the stick.

We need to face the ways in which our culture marginalizes some people.

We need to face the ways in which our governmental systems are rigged to benefit a few (dare we say us?) while targeting others.

We need to face the ways in which the Christian church has marginalized and continues to marginalize some people.

We need to face the ways our individual behavior makes us complicit in a multi-platform system that treats some people as *less* than others.

And we need to break down the walls.

As children of God, as members of the body of Christ, as kingdom residents, it is our job, our calling from God, to follow Jesus, to remove the barriers that keep people marginalized. Yes, that will cause chaos. Yes, that will cause turmoil. Yes, it will entail giving up some things we hold dear. Yes, we could end up on a modern-day cross.

But it will make way for the kingdom of God.

This is what it means to take up the cross: to be willing to sacrifice everything for someone else’s benefit.

Jesus caused chaos and turmoil in order to establish a new order, in order to clear the way, to make straight the path for the kingdom of God.

And we who bear his name follow him into the chaos, with faith that in this kingdom, death brings life. In this kingdom, water drowns *and* water heals. In this kingdom, weakness is power. In this kingdom, self-sacrifice is noble. In this kingdom, the king rides on a donkey.