

2 April 2023 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation Tom Wagner, Matthew 21:1-17 “Palm Sunday: Procession, Poetry and Protest”

Some of us may have childhood memories of processing into worship on **Palm Sunday**, waving palm fronds or whole branches as the adults sang an opening hymn. It was a modest attempt to **reenact the fanfare surrounding Jesus’ final entry into Jerusalem**. I suppose it made an impression on me as a kid, because it was one of the few times, other than Christmas, when children played a role in worship. We were included. That is probably why I use to place Palm Sunday a notch above Easter during my youth. While folks from my background rarely have been big on elaborate rituals, many of us have understood that group participation in the retelling of a story can add to its impact.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week in the Christian liturgical calendar. The gospel accounts start with **the parade into the Jerusalem**, move through numerous sayings of Jesus and conflicts with the authorities; leading to a final meal with his disciples, **arrest, trial and execution, but ultimately resurrection**. The mood of the day shifts from **celebratory to somber**, reflecting the commemorations of the coming week. Today is also known as **Passion Sunday**. The Common Lectionary offers two sets of readings that focus either on the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem or on the much longer Passion narratives which stretch from the Last Supper through the Crucifixion. I’ve made a slightly unusual choice by extending our Palm Sunday reading beyond Jesus’ arrival in the city to include the story of cleansing the Temple. I think it appropriate, especially since **Matthew** places the two events on the **same day** moving from one narrative to the next without interruption. Though Luke also reports the two events on the same day, they are separated by Jesus’ lament over the future fate of Jerusalem. In Mark, cleansing the Temple happens a day after the parade. John’s gospel, which often tells stories a little differently, places the Temple incident early in Jesus’ public career. All four gospels report how Rome crucified an itinerant rabbi under the charge “**Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews**”, indicating he was executed for **sedition**. **Matthew** presents **Jesus as the long awaited messiah** of Israel, which sounds a lot like the conviction Pilate posted on the cross. In keeping with that focus, Matthew uses more **quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures** than the other gospels. Indeed today’s reading contains a number of references to the Prophets and Psalms, and accounts for my use of the word “**poetry**” in today’s title. Furthermore, I count both the procession and the Temple incident as forms of “**protest**”.

Looking at our reading within the larger context of Matthew, back in **Ch. 16**, we find the first of three episodes in which Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to face death. The actual **journey** from Galilee to Jerusalem begins in Ch. 19 and continues through the end of Ch. 20. The best estimates I can find suggest a distance of nearly 80 miles. Though, Matthew doesn’t actually mention it until the beginning of Ch. 26, the reader eventually learns that the occasion for the journey is to celebrate **Passover**. The springtime feast commemorates the **Hebrews’ escape from slavery in Egypt**. It was one of three major **pilgrimage festivals** of Judaism, along with Pentecost and Tabernacles. A city swelled with religious pilgrims likely put both the Roman occupiers and Temple authorities on high alert. Any sign of disorder might give them an excuse to respond with lethal force. Liberation themes of the feast and rising messianic expectations only added to the tension.

The opening verse of today’s reading sets the scene for the new episode. **Jesus and his fellow travelers** have **arrived** in a small village near their final destination—Jerusalem. The story itself easily divides into three parts: **preparation** for the procession, the **procession** and the **Temple incident**. Between Jesus sending a couple of disciples to borrow a donkey and her colt and getting the animals ready, we find the **first Hebrew Bible ‘quote’** loosely based on **Zechariah 9:9**. It offers a rationale for borrowing the donkeys.

While the **Hebrew prophets** wrote in both **prose and poetry**, New Testament authors most often quoted the poetic passages. I suggest there is good reason for that. Most of us are familiar with how much English poetry uses **repetition** of sound through rhyme, alliteration and meter. These serve as powerful **memory devices**. How many of us still rely on the old spelling rule put to verse:

“I before e,
except after c,
or sounding like a,
as in neighbor and weigh.”?

Hebrew poetry works a little differently, using parallelism. The prophet or psalmist expresses an idea in one line and then **repeats that idea using different wording** in another line. Again, the repetition serves as a memory device, especially important in a society where written materials and literacy were less common. Zechariah 9:9 is a good example of the pattern:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Lo, **your king comes to you;**
Triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The prophet was writing at a time when **Persia** had vanquished the Babylonian Empire and exiles were permitted to **return to Judah**. Though it was a time of confusion, it was also a moment of rising hope. In this passage, Zechariah points to a possible **restoration** of the Davidic kingdom. So, messianic associations are appropriate.

Curiously, Matthew’s version of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem speaks of two borrowed animals--**a donkey and her colt**—while the other gospels mention only one. Some commentators have performed some rather creative mental gymnastics speculating how Jesus might have ridden two donkeys. Others suggest that the mother was needed to coax the colt to follow. While that is a reasonable explanation, more likely, the discrepancy came from the author tailoring the story to a **flawed translation** of the prophecy. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, commonly known as the **Septuagint (LXX)** the translator placed the conjunction “**and**” [καί] between the phrases “**humble, and mounted on a donkey**” and “**on a colt, the foal of a donkey**” creating the **impression of two animals**. Apparently, the translator **didn’t fully understand parallelism** in Hebrew poetry.

During the procession, the crowd shouts a fragmentary quote from parts of **Psalms 118:25-26**. The Book of Psalms was the hymnal of ancient Israel. Some scholars refer to Psalm 118 as a victory song. Listen to the full passage:

Save us [**Hosanna**], we beseech you,
O LORD
O LORD, we beseech you, give
us success!

**Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the LORD.**

We bless you from the house
of the LORD.

This becomes:

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!”

Psalms 115-118 as a group are called the *Hallel* or Praise Psalms traditionally **recited during Passover**. It was natural that the passage would be in these pilgrims’ consciousness as they looked forward to celebrating Passover. The crowd has added a reference to the “**Son of David**” giving the chant a messianic flavor. In addition, the meaning of “**Hosanna**” has changed from a **cry for help** to an expression of **praise**.

As Jesus and the **crowd** enter Jerusalem, the **city** is described as “**stirred**”. The original Greek word can also be translated **shaken, caused to quake, or agitated**. It echoes the mood of Herod the Great and the city

during Matthew's **nativity narrative**, when the Magi arrive in Ch. 2 asking, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:3). Herod had lobbied the Roman Senate for years to earn the title "King of the Jews" and now these foreign astrologers suggested he had a rival. In both cases, Jesus' presence threatens the political and religious establishment of official Jerusalem, or "the city". The crowd accompanying Jesus appears to have been made up of fellow pilgrims who have befriended him and his disciples on the road to Jerusalem. **Crowd control** was already a concern for the powers-that-be in anticipation of the festival. Likely **Pilate** had ridden from his headquarters in Caesarea into Jerusalem at the head of a contingent of soldiers intended to reinforce troops permanently garrisoned next to the Temple. His parade displayed **Rome's power** to crush any attempted insurgency. In this light, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem may have served as a **parody**, or at least a **counter-demonstration** using well recognized symbols of Jewish autonomy. He rides a donkey as a commoner, not a warhorse of a conqueror. Laying out garments on the road and waving tree branches as a royal welcome had precedent for royal welcomes in the distant past. This parade displays **ethnic self-respect** before their imperial masters and local collaborators. Their lives matter.

The **mood changes** from street theater to **direct confrontation** as Jesus enters the Temple complex. The **Temple incident** has often been used to **question whether Jesus was truly non-violent**, especially John's version of the story in which he makes a **whip** out of rope. However, even in John's narrative, grammatical arguments suggest **no capitalists were harmed**. Admittedly, Jesus' actions were **disruptive**. During my childhood, **lunch counter sit-ins** and **freedom rides** of the early 1960s disturbed a system of overt racism, though carried out by disciplined and well trained young people. More controversial acts of civil disobedience were performed later by groups of anti-war protesters, such as the **Catonsville 9 and the Plowshares 8**. In **1968**, Phillip and Daniel Berrigan went to a Selective Service office in Catonsville, Maryland with 7 others, took draft files and burned them in the parking lot to protest the Vietnam War. Later in **1980**, the brothers with 6 others entered a GE plant manufacturing reentry vehicles for Minute Men III missiles in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, hammered on a couple of vehicles, poured blood on documents and offered prayers for peace. No one was injured during these actions, yet it does raise the question how far we are willing to go to disrupt systems of violence and exclusion. I have always been **sympathetic** with dramatic public actions like these. They are needed to capture public attention. However, I'm reminded of **Gandhi's example**. Yes, he planned and executed well known **public demonstrations** like the Salt March and even the Raid on the salt works. Yet, the Indian independence movement did not gain victory in a few short years. It took over 30 years from the time he arrived back in India from South Africa, where had worked for about a generation. Much of what Gandhi did was develop **disciplines of daily life**, like the spinning wheel, that disrupted Britain's economic grip on the subcontinent. Too often Christians focus on Jesus' birth and death and largely forget about his teachings and example in between. We should note that the Temple incident likely led to the plot to kill him.

In his statement, Jesus merges lines from two prophets. From **Isaiah 56:7** he uses, "**my house shall be called a house of prayer**". And from **Jeremiah 7:11** he quotes the "**den of robbers**" phrase. Curiously, both Matthew and Luke drop the end of the Isaiah quote that Mark retains, "My house shall be a house of prayer **for all nations**". The larger context of the poetry of **Isaiah 56** speaks of **YHWH's covenant extended** to all people faithful to its provisions, including Gentiles and other outsiders. The fragment from Jeremiah is part of a larger speech given by the prophet at the gates of Solomon's Temple, denouncing his people for the way they treat each other on a day to day basis, and then think they will be saved from **judgment** because they come to the Temple and observe the proper rituals.

What should be noted is that the marketing of sacrificial animals and currency exchanging was taking place in the **Court of the Gentiles**. Though it could be a convenience for pilgrims traveling great distances, the market place was also profitable for the high ranking Temple priests. Likely, the pilgrims were exploited. Perhaps the more oblivious problem was that this **commerce displaced the ability of non-Jews to worship** in a place set aside for that purpose, even if Matthew's version of the story drops the reference to "all peoples". Jesus' next action reflects greater inclusion as **he cures blind and lame** people in the Temple. In the past, they had been

banned from the Temple due to their handicaps. Jesus was disrupting a system of exclusion. Between chasing out the merchants and the healings, he was making a space for outsiders.

While his actions disturbed the religious leaders, hearing **children chanting “Hosanna to the Son of David”** through the Temple was the last straw. Surely, the children were only **repeating** the messianic slogan they had heard the adults shouting in the street earlier in the day. When **the leaders confront Jesus** about the children’s behavior, **he responds** with a question, “Yes have you never read,

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

His answer appears to be a partial quote from Psalm 8:2, even though the third line doesn’t seem to fit with the translations from the Hebrew. Rather than **praise**, the latter part of v.2 speaks of a source of **strength**.

“Out of the mouths of babes
and infants
you have founded a bulwark
because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.”

In the original wording, the innocent voices of children serve as a defense against ones’ critics, which would have been a good response.

There was a movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth. There was an execution, but the movement continued. Some make him out to have been a **revolutionary**. Others think of him as an apolitical **mystic**. What we do know is that his alternative examples of leadership and lifestyle **threatened the status quo** of 1st century Palestine. Yet it is an example of what the late Congressman John Lewis called “**good trouble**” Let us do likewise.

Sources

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