**Grounded In Joy and Sorrow**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

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Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

I learned a new word this week – “palimpsest.” Have you ever heard of it?

P-A-L-I-M-P-S-E-S-T – palimpsest. Back in the day, when writing material was hard to come by because it was rare, one was using parchment or tablets. People would do the ultimate recycling by using the same parchment over again. They would erase what was originally on there and reuse it for a new document. The good news is that the erasing process was not totally effective. Modern scholars can glean what was originally on the parchment as well as what is currently on the parchment. An example is De Republica, by Roman statesman and orator Cicero, which was recovered from a palimpsest. A palimpsest can refer not only to a document, but to anything that has multiple layers. It’s anything that changes over time and shows evidence of that change.

The story of Palm Sunday, I think, is an example of a palimpsest. It has so many layers to it. As you keep peeling it back like an onion one is enriched with new information or a different perspective. On the surface, Palm Sunday is often considered Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem. You can’t help but get caught up in the parade-type atmosphere. This scene is often depicted with joy and jolliness. Anyone who is as old as I am can remember those pictures in the Sunday School curriculum: California Jesus smiling and waving and children running around the donkey with palm fronds. No one seems to have a care in the world. The sun is shining and people just seem glad to be part of such a joyous occasion. Everyone loves a parade.

But why is Jesus riding on a donkey? The only other time you hear of Jesus riding on a donkey is in utero, when a decree went up from Caesar Augustus that all should be registered. So Joseph and Mary, who was then “great with child,” saddled up the donkey and headed for Bethlehem. On one level what great bookends for the story of Jesus, approaching his appointed destinies of coming into the world and going out of the world by riding on a donkey. The only problem with that is there is nothing in Scripture that says Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem. We only conjure that up in our imaginations, which is really too bad. I like that “bookend” imagery.

Peel back the story a little bit and you will see that Matthew tells you why Jesus is riding a donkey. It is to fulfill prophecy. Zechariah, when prophesying about the coming ruler of God’s people says, “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.” (9:9)

Whether it is Jesus who purposely sets up this ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, or Matthew who throughout his gospel seeks always to equate Jesus’ ministry with the prophecy of Hebrew Scripture, the message is clear. The Jewish people would be very familiar with this passage from Zechariah. It is a wake-up call. “Look people! This guy is the real deal. Rejoice! This is the king that has been promised.

But you need to peel this back even more. There is another level to riding in on a donkey. The donkey is a symbol of peace and humility. This is the first day of the week – THE week for the Hebrew people. This is the week that they would celebrate Passover.

We have talked before about John Crossan and Marcus Borg's understanding of what was happening with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Jesus’ entry through the east gate from the Mount of Olives may have been a counter parade to the one that was happening on the other side of town. Every year during the week of Passover, Rome would send columns of guards to Jerusalem to keep the peace, as a multitude of Jews would flock to Jerusalem for this most sacred of feasts.

So while the war machinery of Rome was entering in power upon their great steeds with swords and shields, Jesus was entering from the opposite side of town on a donkey with the waving of palm branches. Quite honestly, in Mark and Luke, there doesn't seem to be a lot of people around besides the disciples of Jesus for his entry. That’s for good reason if Crossan and Borg are right. The real happening is at the other gate on the west side of town. Jesus' entry may not have been so much a populous uprising, as a carefully crafted statement.

That statement being: “there is no such thing as Pax Roma no matter what you see on the other side of town.” That is not peace. There is no such thing as peace through power and might. You might have a cessation of conflict and battle, especially if one side is overwhelmingly more powerful than the other. That was Pax Roma. But real peace comes with humility and knowing that you are God’s.

The palimpsest is just beginning. The story itself begins to layer down. We Christians in the 21st century read this story and understand why people are so excited to see Jesus come into Jerusalem. Of course everyone is cheering and shouting hosannas, because this is Jesus. He is the one that healed the lepers, walked on water, casts out demons, turned water into wine, and raised Lazarus. This is the guy who loves children, and does not think of himself so high and mighty that he won’t talk to hookers and hell raisers, tax collectors and Samaritans. This is the guy that gets executed, but doesn’t stay dead. Oh yeah. They don’t know that yet.

In fact, there is a lot that they don’t know about Jesus. Matthew says, “When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’” They may have seen the donkey, and the palm branches, and understood the symbolism. But they hadn’t a clue who Jesus was. Maybe some of the rumors preceded him. But his ministry was up north, in the area of Galilee, on the other side of Samaria. It’s not like they had television or social media that introduced him to the world. That was one of Judas’ complaints in *Jesus Christ Superstar?*

Every time I look at you I don't understand  
Why you let the things you did get so out of your hand  
You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned  
Why'd you choose such a backward time and such a strange land?  
If you'd come today you would have reached a whole nation  
Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication

Don’t get me wrong. I only want to know.

One of the palimpsests in this story is that we assume that Jesus is entering as a hero. But Jerusalem doesn’t have a clue. And Jesus doesn’t do himself any favors.

We didn’t read this, but if we had just read one more verse - verse 12 – we would have read that Jesus went straight to the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying. Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers. This lends to the lore that Jesus waltzes into Jerusalem with a reputation and authority and a swagger. He is able to walk into the temple where normal business is taking place, albeit a little corrupt, makes a scene, disrupts commerce, all with impunity. He just walks away. In our heads we say, “Of course, this is Jesus.”

Mark tells the story a bit differently and it is very anticlimactic. It’s the same story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey, branches being spread before him. The verbiage implies there may not have been a large crowd. Mark says, “then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” Not exactly the victorious and joyous parade that we think of when we think of Palm Sunday.

If this were a literal palimpsest, it would be like the visible ink on the parchment tells the story of a famous and valiant hero who walks into the midst of a viper den to declare that there is a new sheriff in town. And the people go wild because they know that everything is going to be okay now. That is our Palm Sunday story because we know how it turns out. But what about those who were experiencing it for the first time?

The old story underneath the new ink may not have sounded so hopeful. Jesus knew what needed to happen next. Maybe he knew even more. This would have been a scary time, and especially foreboding for his disciples. They did not know what they were walking into, or how they would be received. Or maybe they did and that is what curbed their enthusiasm. The original story underneath the new ink may not have been so bold and vainglorious.

We understand that because too often that is where we find ourselves, isn’t it? Scared, uncertain, wanting to live by faith but sucked into the frivolity of the world. I think Jesus understands that because that is the story written under our Palm Sunday story.

But what Jesus knew – what grounded Jesus – is that there is not a walk, a journey, a path, or a circumstance where God does not go with us. There is not a curve, a bend, or a corner that we walk around where we won’t find God already waiting for us.

I am not sure if Jesus knew what to expect from this week. I think he enjoyed the parade, and I think he was devastated by what he saw in the temple. And that is where Palm Sunday leaves us. But make sure you come back next week because we are not done with the palimpsest. The old parchment gets erased again. And the story gets better.

But today, let me leave you with a poem. It is actually a prayer titled “Palm Sunday Prayer” by Ann Siddall.

**Palm Sunday Prayer**

It is relatively easy for us

to roster someone

to go and gather palm leaves

to spread in the church today.

And we can easily find music

and a few good words

to help us to remember

and re-enact Palm Sunday.

But what if You arrived

inviting us to really lay down

something important to us

to acknowledge Your arrival?

What if we knew the imminence

of the danger that accompanies You,

or sensed that the authorities

were watching us as we worship?

How then, Jesus, would we meet You today

and what would we spread before You?

And how would we regard humility

from the One we hope will save the world?

Palm Sunday Jesus, help us to see

how and where You enter our world today,

and what You ask us to lay at your feet,

and how we may welcome You in.

Amen.

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