

Matthew 21:1-11

During Lent this year, we've been following transformative conversations in the Gospel of John that Jesus has with various people, considering each like we might consider a portrait in a gallery. They have all offered a timely message for our own lives, from when I last preached a month ago (which now feels like a lifetime!) on Nicodemus' need to give up control to last week when Mark showed how Jesus' raising of Lazarus gave us hope for *any* situation.

For Palm Sunday our gospel readings move us into the narrative of Matthew.

Right before Jesus' triumphal entry Matthew has two "following" stories. The disciples James and John want to follow Jesus right up to his throne so they can sit in the places of honor on Jesus' right and left. When their mother makes this request with her sons at her side, it lights a fire among the disciples. "How dare they ask for that! I'm the greatest!" Jesus corrects their skewed picture of what it looks like to follow Jesus. To follow him, you don't aim to become the leader, you resolve to become the servant. Anyone who wants to Lord over others will miss the path that leads to the cross.

On that path, Jesus encounters two blind men who cry out to him, the Son of David, to have mercy. They offer Jesus nothing, only ask for what they need: the healing of their eyes. Jesus stops his progress, touches them, and restores their eyes. They follow him, surely out of joy and gratitude.

Matthew has given us signposts to know how we should follow Jesus as we cry "Hosanna!", not with the expectation that he will share his royal power with us his worthy followers, but with the hope that he might heal our maladies so we can follow him on the path of suffering and serving others.

This is the framework with which Matthew begins Jesus' passion week.

As they get close to the city, they make a detour in the town of Bethpage near the Mount of Olives. He sent two of his disciples with instructions. They would discover a donkey and a colt which they should untie. If anyone asks why they are doing that, they need to say that the Lord has need of them. This might be miraculous. Jesus had divine knowledge that a donkey and colt would be there, and power to take anything because as the Lord God everything belonged to him anyway. On the other hand, Bethpage is near the village of Bethany. Jesus has friends there, including Simon the Leper and Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. He would know and be known by the people of this area. It would have been common for animals to be tied up and if Jesus knew people in this area, he would have known they would have been happy to let him borrow their animals if needed. Maybe because of his dependence on God in prayer, the Spirit had revealed to him the animals would be there, and the person was willing to give them to Jesus because they had heard about his authority as the Messiah.

However, it happens, he ends up with both a donkey and a colt, and this is really important for Matthew. Both Mark and Luke mention only the colt, but Matthew knows of a Scripture that is being fulfilled in Jesus' procurement of not one but two beasts of burden.

Isaiah 62	Matthew 21:5	Zechariah 9:9
Say to daughter Zion, “See, your Savior comes to you, having his own reward and his work before him.”	Say to daughter Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, meeek and mounted on a female donkey, and on a colt, the son of a beast of burden.”	Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Proclaim, O daughter Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you, just and salvific is he, meeek and mounted on a beast of burden and a young foal.

Matthew first mentions a snippet of Isa 62, a chapter where the prophet looks forward to the restoration of Israel after their punishment of exile. The people of Israel, referred to by their capital Zion, are addressed as the daughter of God and told that their Savior is coming to them. Then Matthew joins another prophet who also casts Israel as God’s daughter. Zechariah calls out to Israel to rejoice, naming them as daughter Zion and daughter Jerusalem. They can rejoice because God will stop her enemies, protect and restore her. Her king is coming. He is righteous and saving. Matthew doesn’t mention these things about the King, but focuses upon the other description of him. He is meek and is sitting on a donkey and on the colt, a son of a donkey.

Matthew has given his readers quite a puzzle. He is the only gospel writer to mention two animals, while the others just focus on the colt. It is a bit of a silly image to imagine Jesus straddling two animals. This arises from how the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible widely used in the first century) has translated the Hebrew text. The Hebrew poetry of Zechariah has mentioned both a beast of burden, and then specified that it is a young male colt. The Septuagint has taken this poetical apposition and turned it into two things, a donkey and a colt. But this is not only a clunky stylistic word change, it actually reflects the reality of the situation. If someone is going to ride on a young colt, especially for the first time (as Mark and Luke note), it would need to be led with an adult donkey. Matthew follows the Septuagint’s lead in describing this situation. Jesus is likely seated on the young colt, but the adult animal needs to travel with them to keep the colt from getting skittish in the large crowd.

Interestingly Matthew specifies that the adult animal is a female. He takes the general term for beast of burden found in the Septuagint and uses instead the specific term for a female donkey, and uses it three times in this story. So, he portrays Jesus getting not just the colt, not just a donkey and a colt, but specifically a mother and son donkey. I can’t help but think that his insistence on these specifics recalls another humble mother and son whom Matthew has told about at the beginning of his gospel.

Most strikingly, riding upon a little donkey close by its mother rather than a grand steed emphasizes the kind of King he is, namely a gentle one. Other Jews of the time looked to Zechariah to hope for their King. This type of humble entry symbolized that he would come to bring peace and not to wage war.

As Jesus has made this choice for his way of entry, the disciples spread their garments on the animal so that Jesus can sit upon it. Then, the crowd follows the lead of the disciples. They spread their garments upon the road for the animals to walk upon. This was a great act of humility symbolizing the honor of the person who would ride over them. Others took a different action, they cut off branches from the trees and laid them on the road. Christians have followed this tradition for millennia.

But they don't just stand there and watch him go by. They travel with him. Some in front, some behind, all the while crying out, "Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, hosanna in the highest."

They are drawing from Ps 118, a powerful psalm that speaks of God's mercy and life. Hosanna is a term that means, "O, Save." They are calling upon Jesus their king to rescue them, peacefully, from the things that keep them bound.

Their actions and noise make an impact. Matthew says that all the city is shaken up as they enter, wondering "Who is this?" The crowds saw him as a prophet coming from the North, from Galilee, from the little village of Nazareth. They had probably heard stories about him before.

Those in the city were right. He was a prophet, speaking truth about God and God's kingdom, but it isn't sufficient to stop with that description of Jesus.

The crowds and disciples were more correct. In addition to being a prophet, he was also the Son of David, the King of Israel, coming to save his people.

Typically, sermons on the Triumphal Entry emphasize the crowds and disciples' misunderstanding. They thought Jesus was a King all about power, and surely James and John's request to sit on his right and left might indicate that misunderstanding was present. But his riding upon the little donkey with his mother as a direct picture of Zechariah 9 would have gotten the correct message across. He was a *humble* King. I think the crowd got it too. His humility propelled them to take the coats off their backs or the branches growing on the road and lay them on the ground for the donkey to step on.

In the state in which we find ourselves this week, my sense is that we don't identify as strongly with James and John, as we do with the blind men. We aren't too worried about power right now; instead, we need someone to save us. We, like the blind man, need someone to heal our bodies so that our social standing can be restored. We need healing and provision, and so we cry out to the King who humbled himself so that he could provide those things. And we follow him on the way.

Healing and provision are guaranteed on this path, but it is a path that first passes through the cross. We might, in ways we've never experienced before, experience suffering this week, if not for ourselves then as we grieve for others. As we do, we know we are not alone. He journeys this path with us this week, and we know that because he did, healing is on its way.