

**Matthew 21:1-11**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' (230)

With this, we join in real time with Jesus. This event, Jesus' so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem (though this gospel in particular will deny us any talk of triumph); this event which gives us so-called Palm Sunday (though this gospel will also deny us any mention of palms): this, if little else, has us join with Jesus on this 4<sup>th</sup> day before his Thursday-night arrest, this 5<sup>th</sup> day before his crucifixion on what's come to be called Good Friday. With this event, when Jesus and his disciples have finally arrived in Jerusalem, we slow down and join with him in time in a particular way—each day this week corresponding to a day recounted in the gospel narrative.

There's something to that, if you ask me. If this story itself, if this event itself, isn't much to consider for too long, there's something to it being a calibration for us: with this, we take on the speed of life, slower than the speed of story—which makes it worth returning to each year, which we do, return to it each year. Since it's in all four gospel narratives, and since it's in (more to the point) all three synoptic gospels, each of which gives shape to each of the three liturgical years—Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke in Year C—we hear it each year, and always on this Sunday, this last Sunday of Lent, this first day of Holy Week.

The significance in this story is in its setting us at the speed of Jesus' final days.

Which isn't nothing.

A million years ago, I saw the movie *Jesus of Montreal*. As I remember it, it has a parish priest at a city cathedral hire a local actor to update their annual passion play. The actor takes on the project, researching the source material of Jesus' final week and eventual passion. Not (apparently) raised in the church, not currently a practicing Christian, he becomes quite consumed

with it all; and what results is a contemporized version in which he plays Jesus and many of his actor friends play disciples, and Jesus' friends Mary and Martha, and members of the crowd.

Funny thing: the actors begin to resemble the characters they're playing. The story seeps into their lives, so they all take on more gravitas than they'd had before. Young actors in a big city trying to make it work and settling for anything that comes their way, they live and move now with more sense of importance, a little more dignity with each passing day.

What's more, their playing out the storied events of Jesus in his final days have them living out these events, surprising parallels, surprising sort-of-likes.

When we gather in Godly Play, we ask after hearing the story, "Where are you in this story, or what part of this story is about you?" But it isn't just during Godly Play when we might ask this. And it isn't a frivolous question, something just fit for children, Godly Play having been developed for children—as if we're all just humoring children and their pretending, as if the world is just waiting for when children at last become adults and finally get serious, finally get real. Turns out, they've been serious all along; *we've* been serious all along, even if we imagine ourselves living in a story, perhaps *especially* if we imagine ourselves living in a story.

Another wrinkle: it's possible Jesus is playing here, is play-acting—entering the city on a donkey, the foal of donkey, entering it as if *taking* it, the way an emperor would, or a king. That's one way to read what he's doing here. This is theater, an enactment of something familiar; street-theater, a combination of planned and spontaneous, scripted but impromptu.

For such an actual entry might indeed have been happening around this same time. At another such gate into the city, it's possible an imperial guard of some sort might have been making its entrance, making its presence known. Or it might have been some official more local—the king, Herod; the governor, Pontius Pilate. That's what some commentators based on some historical recounting suppose might have been the case: Jesus was mimicking something actual.

And I can believe it. It was the time of the Passover festival, after all. This ancient remembrance and celebration of the people's long-prior liberation from servitude in Egypt, this would have had the city swelling with visitors, pilgrims—doubling the city population for the next eight days or so.

Moreover, they'd have had revolution on their minds. Passover wasn't just any old feast. The festival to retell the story of Pharaoh's enslaving the people, and then Moses come to lead the people out—and with wondrous signs (ten plagues, a way made through the sea): this was a slave-

rebellion, a real uprising, and one in which the Lord led the charge, and the slaughter, so the story goes. Eventually the first-born son of every Egyptian household struck dead.

That's what the people were celebrating: a slave-uprising. That's what the people swelling the city were remembering: when the people fought off the yoke of oppression.

Such a remembrance: it can give you ideas.

When these days you celebrate Passover, it's with a certain remove. You don't *actually* let the bloodlust come in. You don't *actually* gin up an eagerness for the first-born of all Egyptians to have died.

But they might have then. Things were different then. Governance was different then. More boot on the neck than consent of the governed. Sure, Pharoah was bad. But the Romans weren't much better, those who ruled at the time when Jesus lived and, just now, entered the city, the crowded, roiling city, where tempers might have been ready to flare. Any moment. The empire would need to keep an eye, to keep a boot...

See, cuz there had been rebellions in the recent past. The Maccabee brothers, whose uprising two centuries earlier, gave root for the holiday Hannukah: theirs was a bloody attempt, and they were victorious for a time.

But Rome came back. Rome always comes back. The empire, any empire, is always in the position to strike back—and much harder.

Two centuries later, though, the victory of the Maccabees might have stoked more than a few revolutionary hopefuls—which the governance of this region might have known, and which might have had the empire, or some local subset, enter through some other gate just now—just to show themselves to the people, just to remind them that their festival of liberation shouldn't get out of hand.

Jesus could well have been playing with these conventions. While at one gate there might have been an actual triumphal entry into the city, at this other gate there was an inverted display of such a thing. No war-horse, no stallion: Jesus would ride a donkey; no, the foal of a donkey. No soldiers attending, no courtiers: Jesus would come with the same straggly group that had been with him all along, though growing in number, growing. His way would be made not with a red carpet, an ancient tradition, but with people's cloaks and some cut leafy branches strewn in his path.

And he'd have come, yes, from Beth-phage, a place long anticipated as the site of an apocalyptic battle. Following this, according to one prophet, he would enter the city: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a

donkey.” Interesting, though, that in Matthew’s citing this verse, he left out the bit about being triumphant, about being victorious. Matthew stresses, by omission, the humility of it all.

How are you with humility? When’s the last time you allowed yourself to feel it, you exposed yourself to it as actual experience? When’s the last time you really let it into your life?

Recently someone was extolling the humility of a new pastor in their midst. During his interviewing process, he made sure to go to the food pantry the church houses in its parish hall. He served there for a couple hours.

“Humility,” this person said.

“That’s not humility,” I said. “That’s power, a living out of the so-called humble-brag.”

Humility is joining the breadline because you know you need the bread and this is the only way you’ll get it. Humility is joining the procession whose end is doom because you know it’s still your best hope, joining a slow walk through the final days of someone you love, something you love, while the world around you bangs drums of might, joins displays of dazzling victory.

Today’s a day when the choice is set again before us, before *you*. Which will it be? Are you in this to win it, or can you tolerate an entirely different turn of events? Less revolution than salvation. Less violent uprising than crushing crucifixion, if also eventual (impossible!) resurrection—which, even this, won’t be all it could be. No spectacle, no exacting revenge, just returned to show himself alive evermore.

Which will it be? Today’s the day when the story slows down, touches down in real time, so we search for ourselves in its midst once again. I wonder where you are in this story, or what part of the story is about you.

Thanks be to God.