

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023
Matthew 21:1-11
“A Fresh Look Through Old Eyes” by Rev. Sue Trigger

Matthew 21:1-11

(Common English Bible)

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. ² He said to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it.” He sent them off right away. ⁴ Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, ⁵ *Say to Daughter Zion, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey’s offspring.”* ⁶ The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

⁸ Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*” ¹⁰ And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. “Who is this?” they asked. ¹¹ The crowds answered, “It’s the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

One of the up-and-coming theologians being talked about today is Dr. Daryl Ness. He is getting attention in theological circles because of his post-modernist belief in religious pluralism. He holds the idea that no one religion can be true because each person’s individual faith is shaped by environmental factors. Their family, the time and place they grow up in, and the events of their lifetime all contribute to a person’s religious experience. As a part of his ministry, he works with families to assist them in creating faith experiences that nurture the faith of their dogs. His practices include taking dogs on spiritual walks in the woods and encouraging them to sit, be still and know God. April Fools! I realize I’m a day late.

You weren’t expecting that were you? At least I hope not. But, when was the last time something totally unexpected happened during Sunday morning worship? Okay, that would be Youth Sunday in March. Granted you’ve had a clown or two appear last year when we experienced Bright. But on the whole, most weeks you can come to church and pretty much know what to expect.

You probably left home this morning thinking the children will be so cute as they march around the Sanctuary during the first hymn or that you would be handed a palm branch when you arrived, or since it's the first Sunday of the month, there will be Communion. You probably came expecting to hear the story of Jesus' parade into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. There is comfort in knowing what to expect that we will pray together and sing together and break bread together.

If any of those things were your expectation, we did not disappoint. This morning we heard the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, although you may not have expected a video. Some of us have heard the story every year since we were a child. We know about the disciples finding a colt for Jesus to ride. We can imagine the crowd of people gathered to cheer and praise him. They threw down their cloaks and waved palms shouting, "Hosanna." It's a story that's been with us thousands of years. But there is a lot more going on in this story than first meets the eye.

Jesus and his disciples had just traveled to Jerusalem with a crowd of perhaps 160,000 Jewish believers for the celebration of the Passover feast. Israel was still under foreign domination and the Roman occupation of their homeland was a sore spot for the Jews. Both the religious leaders and Roman officials would have been keeping an eye on Jesus. He was a perceived threat and if he caused any trouble, they would have him arrested. Riots and uprisings were fairly common during the Passover, so Rome made sure that there was a strong military presence during that week. Soldiers were placed throughout the city to keep an eye on the temple and the crowds. So along comes Jesus, drawing a crowd that is praising him as king.

While Jesus rode into town on his colt, there was another procession happening on the other side of town. The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote about a procession that most of us have probably never heard about; the procession of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate and his military force marched into Jerusalem at the western gate into the city. The message was clear, nobody better cause any trouble.

We don't hear about Pilate much. He shows up in the Good Friday story and Apostle's Creed, but we don't often delve into who he was. Pilate was a tyrant. It is believed that he crucified thousands of people he believed caused trouble. He was known for his cruelty and disrespect of the Jewish people. Once, well before Jesus entered on Palm Sunday, Pilate entered

the city with his army and allowed his soldiers to set up their flags and busts of the emperor in the Jewish temple. A massive non-violent protest by the Jews followed and forced Pilate to remove the symbols of the Roman Empire from the temple. Another time, Pilate stole money from the temple funds to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem. So, it's no wonder that when Pilate and his army marched into the city, riots and protests broke out. Pilate was ready though, he had Roman soldiers dressed as Jewish civilians and armed with hidden clubs. They mingled with the shouting crowd and attacked the people when he gave the sign. Many were killed or hurt. Pilate was a bad guy.

Back on the east side of the city, another parade was being planned for the arrival of Jesus. The crowd that gathered hoped he would be a different kind of ruler. Jesus sent his disciples to get a small donkey. When a colt had been secured, Jesus rode it down the steep road from the Mount of Olives to the Golden Gate of the city, with a crowd of his supporters shouting "Hosanna!" Hosanna is a Hebrew word that means "Save Us." The word mixes praise to God with a prayer that God will save his people and do it soon. Keep in mind that they weren't looking for a spiritual salvation so much as a political salvation. "Save us from the Roman empire! Save us from the oppression of this occupation." They spread their cloaks on the colt and cut branches from the surrounding fields — actions that were done only in the presence of royalty. Even the palms would have caught the attention of the Roman soldiers. Palms were waved for emperors and governors, not for a small town Jew. Just this action may have been seen as inciting a riot. The palm branch was a symbol of the Roman empire used on coins. Were they proclaiming a Jewish emperor? Not in Pilate's town.

So, when we're waving our palm branches around on Sunday morning, one of the things we have to be careful not to miss is that Jesus was intentionally setting up a comparison between the violent and powerful empire and the peaceful and grace-filled kingdom of God. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan have studied the writing of Josephus and believe the Palm Sunday parade was a kind of pre-planned political protest. Amy Jill Levine, the New Testament scholar who happens to be Jewish agrees. The symbolism of a ruler riding on a donkey would not have been lost on anyone, and it would have put some on edge, especially Jewish leaders and Roman authorities. The people throwing their cloaks in the road would have

remembered the words of the prophet Zechariah: an image of a king coming into Jerusalem with shouts of joy from the people. Zechariah painted an image of a king who was triumphant and victorious— but also “humble” and riding on a donkey instead of a war horse (Zechariah 9:9). This king is not a conquering hero who uses weapons to destroy, but one who will break the power of the empire with justice and “peace” for all nations (Zechariah 9:10).

Together the gospels and these biblical scholars show us a sharp contrast. Pilate’s procession embodied power, violence and the glory of the Roman Empire that ruled the world; the procession of Jesus embodied the kingdom of God. The kingdom Jesus revealed in his ministry of healing, his message of good news and, ultimately, his sacrificial death on a Roman cross. An unexpected message that reveals God who works in unexpected, and sometimes unpopular ways.

We call the coming days Holy Week, and the week begins with an unexpected story of a humble parade taking a position of non-violence on the eastern side of town standing up against the evil empire that was marching into Jerusalem on the west side of town. On the one hand, it was a joyful celebration; on the other hand, it was a cry for salvation from the oppression that was taking position all over town against them.

In the days that followed nearly everything Jesus did was unexpected. Remember when I said that the Roman soldiers would have been watching for crowds gathering at the temple? Guess the first Jesus went after arriving in Jerusalem. You guessed it, the temple. And you’ll remember that it wasn’t a peaceful visit. No, no, Jesus was angry with the corruption of the temple. They were selling animals for sacrifice at exorbitant prices that placed an undue burden on the poor. Jesus, under Roman eyes, proceeded to throw over the cages and turn over the tables where the animals were sold. Exactly the kind of uprising Pilate had no time for. Jesus was on his radar before Passover had even begun.

In another unexpected moment, Jesus, while eating with his disciples, got up and washed their feet, something only a servant would do He wanted to show them that a leader must be one who serves. Jesus showed us a leader who would not restore the kingdom Israel as his followers had hoped. But one thing is certain, the disciples certainly never expected that Jesus would die

on a cross and then rise from the grave. The stories of Holy Week are the stories of God who works in unexpected ways.

So let's go back a moment and think about the rather expected ways of the Church. It has become a place of comfortable expectations. We know the routine of worship, we know how our programs work, and we know it so well that some find it ordinary and uninspiring. Sometimes we complain when something unexpected happens. As we begin Holy Week, I ask you to spend some time reflecting on this question, "How can we maintain an institution that is faithful to God that works in only expected ways?" The times we are living in have shown us that the expected church isn't speaking very well to our society. Perhaps God is asking us to do something unexpected?

Seeing a new path into the future will require eyes that can see God at work in unexpected ways. Will we follow when God asks us to go in unexpected directions, or will we find ourselves among the crowd of people who waved their palms hoping that Jesus would be the Messiah they hoped for, and then turned their backs when he did things that were unexpected? May we find the unexpected path.