

Matthew 21:1-17

Over and over again we learn that the realm of God cannot be contained. It cannot be packaged once and for all as if it had a final form. Like mustard or dandelions, it pops up again after having been thoroughly routed. I remember years ago I read a historical fiction about how Christianity spread through lands where Celtic goddess worship had prevailed. The old Celtic institutions fell, old and weak and worn out, and the protagonists of this book watched sadly, bereft of the spirits that had sustained them. And then as the Church took hold and built its sanctuaries, who should they see within but the goddess, now named Mary, but clearly recognizable as their own old goddess.

When the old vessels become corrupted or antiquated, God's realm does not wither. It refreshes. And that's what Jesus seems to be trying to get across in Matthew's version of the Palm Sunday story. A commentator on this passage said, by the way, Thank goodness that Matthew, like Mark and John, specifically cites "leafy branches." If it were up to Luke this would be "Garment Sunday." But Matthew has crafted his telling of the story with great deliberateness and artistry.

It would be too much to note every single reference Matthew's made here, but let me point out a few. He describes Jesus performing a kind of re-telling of scripture, and some of his audience catching on and joining the performance. So at the Mount of Olives he sends his disciples to get him two animals, a donkey and a colt. The Mount of Olives is a hill east of Jerusalem that is associated with eschatology (end times) and with the prophecy of Zechariah that Matthew alludes to. The Mt. of Olives implies that something totally new is coming and the old order will be broken.

People enjoy a good chuckle about the absurd notion that Jesus would ride two mounts at once, and that Matthew must not have recognized the poetic device of repetition in Zechariah, that when Zechariah said "mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey," he was just re-describing the same animal." But Matthew knew things, and he's not just getting sloppy here. He's having Jesus allude *really literally*, in a very theatrical way, to the Zechariah quote, just in case onlookers might not recognize what's going on if he came in just on a young donkey. Whether he's straddling two animals or standing athwart them like a gymnast, Jesus is entering Jerusalem on *exactly* what Zechariah said, so nobody will miss it.

And who exactly was Zechariah describing? The new David, king of Israel, who would bring in the messianic age. He would "cut off" chariots and war-horses from Israel and command peace to the nations. But Matthew leaves out a couple of Zechariah's adjectives, "triumphant" and "victorious." He leaves in only "humble." So Jesus is inviting onlookers to see him as the new king, but not a warlike or victorious king, a humble king.

Jerusalem is celebrating Passover, and the city is jammed with every kind of Jew there is. And because Passover celebrates God's liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery under one empire, it was unavoidable that the celebrants would associate Rome with Egypt, and become more restive than usual. In fact, it was an uprising at Passover in 66 CE that finally brought about the Roman destruction of the Temple. Spirits are high, excitement is high, and Pilate is going to enter the city from its west gate to make a show of force as a reminder not to get too carried away with their little religious festival.

Jesus enters Jerusalem like a ruler too, but with a different show of force: here he is accompanied and welcomed by basically the people you see at the state fair: people with dirty

fingernails, people with bad hair, unruly children, a really unfortunate collection of t-shirts, a lot of off-key singing. And yes, they're strewing garments along the road, which is kind of touching because they didn't have a lot of garments, but also they're waving palm branches. What is this about? The waving of palm branches is actually associated with Sukkot, another festival, but there's no clear theological reason for this either, and apparently the rabbis have had to do a lot of work to account for the branch waving. Hello, Celtic goddesses. Palm branch waving is probably a relic of ancient earth religion and animism that is so fundamental, it breaks through and becomes part of Judaism. But at this moment, what we have is human beings and nature itself welcoming the new king, while Pilate marches in through the west gate with a lot of heavy clanking and grim imperial splendor. "Hosanna!" cry the people. This means "save us," but they're saying it joyfully because the new king *can* save them.

Usually the reading stops here on Palm Sunday. But the narrative lectionary takes us another six verses, so we can see how Jesus continues the performance, and how the rabble in their random t-shirts catch on and play along. In Matthew's telling, Jesus leads the procession straight to the Temple and he overturns the tables of the moneychangers. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah 7:7, saying that the religious authorities have made God's house a den of robbers. If you read the rest of Jeremiah 7, you see that the verse occurs in a longer diatribe against religious authorities for having accommodated people's desire to buy off God with sacrifices. People seek liturgical solutions for ethical problems, and rather than doing the hard work of justice and peace, they've reached a comfy arrangement that allows them to be okay with God while not changing their lives in any way. Anybody who knows their Jeremiah will hear all this in what Jesus is saying.

Jesus "cleansed" the Temple by upsetting those tables, and the implication is that he created a vacuum. But in Matthew, right away, the blind and the lame come to Jesus and he heals them. He cleared out the Temple and it immediately re-filled with outcasts and sick people. *Now* the Temple is restored! It's as if Jesus had said, "What's happening in this place is over. We're not doing this any more. Things we've been doing in this space have been working just enough that people are still coming, but the things themselves are stumbling blocks. They're not bringing in the realm of God, and we need to stop doing this and see what rushes in to fill the space." Children are imitating their elders, crying out **in the temple** "Hosanna to the Son of David," and the chief priests ask Jesus angrily if he hears what they're saying. "Yep," says Jesus, "out of the mouths of babes, huh?" and indeed as we know, children will be the Greek chorus of any momentous occasion, marking it with more excitement than comprehension, and inadvertently revealing the truth.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem like a personification of Zechariah's messianic prophecy and Jeremiah's condemnation of stale religion. He has made God's people and God's creation shake in anticipation of what is to come. He has emptied the Temple of its pillars and mainstays and authorities, and filled it with outcasts, unclean people, and children, and within this hallowed space, performed healings on all who were broken. In the messianic age, in the realm of God, religion is not performative piety but actual enacted compassion, the gathering in of everybody to the wedding feast.

On Passion Sunday we often see this is poignant and tragic--Jesus' last hurrah, people misunderstanding his promise and becoming the angry mob when they realize that he will not be the kind of king David they had envisioned. But today I see it differently. Today I think that

Jesus has designed a performance and invited the crowds into it so that when he has become the scapegoat that the Romans execute, they can recognize the larger story and pick it up, performing it in the spirit they'd caught from him. He has given them a foretaste of the kingdom, and even after the catastrophe of the crucifixion, after the shock has worn off, they will have eyes to see the risen Christ popping up here, there, all kinds of random places. He broke the power of "we've always done it this way" and "there's nowhere to go from here," and taught them to expect a fourth act--to be **in** the fourth act.

Today is the set-up, not for Easter, but for Pentecost, the birth of the church. Today everybody got their roles and took their first improv class. They've caught the vision of the humble kingdom with no war chariots, where worship takes place where people are welcomed and healed, where children speak truths greater than they can comprehend, and dandelions sprout with wild abandon.

Let us pray: Righteous God, you brought your son Jesus into Jerusalem to show people the radical grace of your love. Show us this grace, and give us eyes to see your goodness. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.