

Psalm 117, Matthew 21:1-11

A little less than 30 hours ago, at 3 in the morning we drove into the church parking lot after over a week in the Holy Land. It was, as advertised, an experience that rocked us to our core and allowed God to intervene in our lives like never before. Various times throughout the trip we were thinking to ourselves, it doesn't get any better than this.

While we were floating on the Dead Sea, not a single day of rain, the sun was out the whole time, seeing a fish in the sky at the very place where Jesus met his disciples in the Gospel of John after his resurrection and asking Peter over a fish barbeque, do you love me? Singing in a church that would make any choir sound like the best in the world. Sitting on the steps where Jesus would have argued with the religious leaders at the age of 12. There were experiences that made us think, it can't get any better than this.

And then there were experiences that made us wonder, what in the world? After a long hot day at the Dead Sea, and visiting Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls are and then seeing Masada, a Roman Fortress built out of the side of a mountain, we were supposed to be staying in a Bedouin Village. We rolled in and this is what we saw, not what we expected, and we were all thinking, it has to get better than this. There was a real potential for a mutiny, but then something happened. All the women when I went into the tent were on their stomachs in their beds with their heads facing in and they were laughing and giggling like a huge sleep over. It was the turning point in our trip, it bonded our group like nothing else. It continued to get better and better after that.

Today for Palm Sunday we are going to skip over the by now traditional James readings and focus upon Christ's last week of his life as presented to us by the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew doesn't really give us any room for thinking that we are more important than we really are. He constantly puts us as people up to the light of Jesus Christ and we learn that when we start thinking we are something and that it doesn't get any better than this, because of who we are, Jesus turns it around and says, no, it is because of whom I am.

Palm Sunday is really a celebration and a party for Jesus who really didn't want a celebration. The loud music, the palms, the festivities don't fit into the idea of what Jesus would want. In spite of that this is what happened and as Jesus rode into Jerusalem you

can't help but notice that he bears the marks of humility and gentleness that will foreshadow this passion week which is to come.

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We begin today in our Scripture at the last week of Jesus' life. Today begins what we call the passion week. Our last two days we spent in Jerusalem and began with the Palm Sunday road. What I want you to notice is how the road takes us by certain sights that are so crucial to Jesus' ministry so as he makes his way into town it is almost a highlight of Jesus' career. He makes his way through the cemetery, past the Garden of Gethsemany, through the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley, and then into the Golden Gate where the Messiah is supposed to come again.

The last trip we made with my father when he had early onset of Alzheimers was a 3 week trip through Europe where we saw all the sights where he had worked. We went through Switzerland, and then through Spain, and Portugal, then up to England and Scotland, then back down into Rome. It was a poignant reminder of all that he had done, while at the same time knowing that his mind and his body would soon succumb to that dreaded disease.

Jesus seems to be the only one who recognizes that he is going to be succumbing to this whiplash of being on the top of the world, or as Psalm 117 the center of the praise and the celebration as a reflection of God's faithfulness, to a traitorous deception that ends up with him being beaten and crucified. And so Jesus here today begins this week with a ride into Jerusalem to fulfill the Scriptures of Zechariah 9 that states Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion, Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.

Well according to this prophecy he is to enter Jerusalem riding a donkey which would signify that he is the king. He sends out his disciples to find a donkey but he equips them in a curious way. The first donkey you see when you get into town, bring it back to me. If anyone bothers you about it just say the Lord needs it. Now two things happen here that say something about who Jesus is and what type of king he is. It reflects what it means to be able to say that it doesn't get any better than this not because of who we are but because of who Jesus is.

First of all his disciples don't question him, they probably figure what's the big deal if he can cast out demons and calm a storm he can certainly get a donkey. Their obedience reflects their trust in their leader who never forced them to go but greatly encouraged them. Secondly the plan actually worked. They take the donkey, someone calls out to them, they respond "The Lord needs them", and with that the word is spread that Jesus is on his way. This taking of the donkey began the announcement that Jesus was on his way.

Jesus rides the donkey toward Jerusalem and by now a crowd had formed. It would be an appropriate time before it gets too chaotic and confusing to address the crowd and greet them. But from the time Jesus alights upon the donkey, he remains absolutely silent. He understands that his riding into Jerusalem represents the fulfillment of Scripture and nothing else. Jesus knew that he was a king, and he was, even in that setting, forging an example of how to act.

The crowds quickly formed and gathered and the calls went out: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven." I was shocked by the diversity of the citizens of Israel. When you think of someone who is Jewish you normally have a picture in your mind that is not very diverse. That is not the reality. There are African Jews, European, Arab, the list goes on. They all serve 3 years in the army if you are a male and 2 years if you are female. I was shocked to see these young soldiers representing as Psalm 117 the fact that we should: Praise the Lord, all you nations. Extol him, all you peoples! All the people were represented.

This king is a humble king who doesn't ask too much for those who serve him except to do his will. He doesn't ask for a party, he doesn't ask for palms, he doesn't ask for anything except our devotion and our dedication and that we do his will.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem we read in verse 21 that the whole city seismos: Where do you know that word from? That's right, like an earthquake. The presence of Christ shook the city. In Matthew there are two other times we find this word: When Jesus dies the curtain of the temple is torn in two and the earth seismos, shakes and the tombs are opened, and the dead arise and walk around. The presence of this humble and gentle king is so powerful that it shakes Jerusalem, it splits open the earth. The third

place we hear this word is in the resurrection. Matthew has the women arriving at the tomb in the midst of a great earthquake which was followed by an angel rolling the stone away from the tomb of Christ.

At the peak of the celebration, as the disciples are probably thinking it doesn't get any better than this, the crowd comes to and almost snaps out of it. In the midst of the crowd someone asks: who is this? Who are you? What makes you so special to have an escort into the city? How telling and it really lays bare the fact that they do not know the Christ. Their answer is even more telling. He is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.

But Christ doesn't say a word. It is hard to be followers of people without title. We all like to believe in, and follow the winner. Someone who is triumphant, someone who leads forcefully and with a sword. Someone who is at the top of their game and is only getting better. No one wants to support a no name, or even worse a loser. Humility and signs of weakness bother us. You notice that in these verse Matthew leaves out Zachariah's words of triumphant and victorious, and he does that on purpose.

Our guide shared his testimony of how he came to know Christ. He is Jewish, but believes that Jesus is God and Lord and Savior. His second child, his son, was born with a kidney defect and they were going to have to operate on him. He was already a tour leader and one of his groups, from Australia, asked if they could pray with Erez before the final decision was made about the surgery. They prayed and asked for healing, and Erez went back to the doctor with his wife and little boy, and wouldn't you know the kidney was perfectly healed. No trace of abnormality.

I know that the king that I serve, I serve because he shook my life down to its very foundations. This king is Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, who with all humility and gentleness will shake your life if you would only let him. I don't know if you find yourself at a place where you are saying it doesn't get any better than this, if you do and you aren't allowing Jesus into your life, you know things can and will change. If you give your life over Christ then every single day we can celebrate his presence and know that it doesn't get any better than this, not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is. Amen.