

“Estimated Time of Arrival”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
April 13th, 2014
Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2,19-29

Matthew 21:1-11

And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up.

“Who is this?” they asked. The crowds answered,

“It’s the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Matthew 21:10-11

Let us pray... O God,

We celebrate your triumphal entry to Jerusalem those many centuries ago.

May it be true for us today, that you enter our hearts and our world

to establish your Kingdom as a beloved community that is possible.

Amen

Are we ready for Jesus to return? Do we really expect him to return?

If so, how would things change?

I attended an interfaith panel; discussion where the participants

were so busy supporting their own position,

they were practically arguing onstage.

What if the Messiah showed up – would anybody notice?

Would we know? Would it even make a difference?

When I was a kid, my neighbor – who was a teenager, took me to see a movie,

“Colossus of Rhoades” with actor Rory Calhoun as the hero.

The Colossus of Rhodes was one of the great 7 wonders of the ancient world –

a huge statue of the god Helios.

In the movie, the statue’s feet were planted on either side of the harbor,

protecting it from enemy ships with a great caldron of boiling oil

that the statue held which could be poured onto invaders.

The bad guys – of course, had gotten control of the Colossus

to use for their own greedy purposes and Rory Calhoun was fighting them.

When he climbed out at the very top of the statue and it looked like all was lost,

he did a spectacular dive and escaped.

I started cheering – but my neighbor hushed me up saying,

“It’s just one guy. What’s he going to do...”

I really liked my neighbor and respected him,

and he made me think – “What’s one guy going to do?”

That lesson has come back to me as a reality check from time to time,

but I still think that even one person can make a difference.

Willard, p.2

On Palm Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem –
the conclusion of his journey to a destiny set in motion
with the death of John the Baptist.

By the time he arrives, Jesus is a celebrity – someone who was known as
a miracle worker and great teacher.

A huge crowd had already gathered to travel with him when he reached Jericho –
at the entrance to the perilous road that leads west to Jerusalem,

Palm Sunday is the seasonal end to the 40 days of Lent, symbolizing
Jesus' temptations in the desert for 40 days as well as bringing to mind
the 40 years that Moses and the Hebrews spent in the Sinai wilderness.
and the season of Passover – celebrating God's mercy for sparing
the Hebrew people in Egypt from the 10 plagues
and rescuing them from oppression.

So, Jesus' arrival coincides with the pilgrimage
of many Jewish people throughout the world who were coming
to attend the Passover festival at the Temple of Jerusalem.

Jesus arrives at Bethphage and tells his disciples exactly where to find
a donkey and its colt, which he will use to ride into the city.

In a way, this is a comical image that pokes fun at the high and mighty
who would enter the city on a war horse to conquer it –
mocking the pageantry of military might.

Jesus riding in on a donkey represents his humility and vulnerability –
however it is a sly nod to how some people were calling him
the Son of David, by referring to an obscure text, 1Kings 1:33-35...

[King David said,]

*Take along some of my officials and have Solomon ride my own mule
to Gihon Spring.*

When you get there,

Zadok and Nathan will make Solomon the new king of Israel.

*Then after the ceremony is over, have someone blow a trumpet
and tell everyone to shout, "Long live King Solomon!"*

Bring him back here, and he will take my place as king.

He is the one I have chosen to rule Israel and Judah.

Jesus also deliberately draws upon the Messianic hope for a victorious king
who nevertheless humbles himself in Zechariah 9:9, which says:

Everyone in Jerusalem, celebrate and shout!

Your king has won a victory, and he is coming to you.

He is humble and rides on a donkey; he comes on the colt of a donkey.

Willard, p.3

A friend of mine once told me, ‘nobody rides into town on their white horse and solves all the problems’.

A recent internet gag shows a picture of three of our living presidents, walking away together with the caption in words to effect that, “If you think everything will be OK when [a president] leaves office, you don’t understand the problem”.

This is another way of saying,
“What’s one guy going to do?”

This is true even about Jesus. There’s still trouble in the world.

Certainly, we need leaders to help guide in crisis situations,
whether that’s leading a country or parenting a family;

But it’s not up to just one person,

Even so, Jesus showed us that one person can make a difference.

One person can shake up our thinking from

‘We’ve always done it this way’ to start saying, “We can do it”.

We’ve seen too many examples of selfish individuals
shaking things up in bad ways;

But what if people were committed to change the world for the better,
first as individuals, then as a team – building up a community
that is actively concerned about making the world a better place?

Riding into town on a donkey, Jesus did make a difference
and he has promised to come back again.

How will that be? What form would he take?

What gender, what ethnicity, what language? Would he be Christian?

Would we recognize him?

What if he was already here? Would he arrive with the fanfare of adoring crowds?

Would he slip in by the midnight train? What if he is already here?

The Gospel lessons of the past few weeks included stories about people
whose lives were changed by their encounters with Jesus –
and who influenced others in turn.

There was Nicodemus, who learned we have to be ‘born again’ to see the world
like a child with imagination for possibilities;

There was the woman at the well, isolated by shame and prejudice,
who was given purpose and a voice in her community;

There was the person born blind, who received the gift of sight
and enough backbone to claim his dignity;

And there was Martha and Mary, whose brother Lazarus
was raised from death by the power of God’s love.

Willard, p.4

People still need to be born anew, still need to be freed from shame,
still need to find insight into their lives, still need to come out of a tomb.

In what ways does the Messiah need to show up in your life?

What if Christ showed up today?

In what ways can we make a difference to be more like Jesus
who came into our midst as one of us, on a donkey –

who promised yet to show up like one of us,
perhaps by plane, train, automobile, or just walking?

The journey for Jesus brought him to Jerusalem

to confront the powers of this world in ways that only he could do,
so that the rest of us could begin to follow his example
and dare to change the world, too.

It's time to get on the train. It's time to get on board.

It's time to work together to make it a better world.

A little bit can still make a difference, even though nobody can be expected
to ride into town on a white horse to solve all the problems.

Sometimes they ride into town in ways that we barely notice,
but they still make a difference. We can still make a difference.

Amen

*Our first lesson today is from Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
and it is a hymn of praise to God.
This could also be Jesus' words upon entering Jerusalem...*

[1] Give thanks to the Lord because he is good,
because his faithful love lasts forever.

[2] Let Israel say it: "God's faithful love lasts forever!"

[19] Open the gates of righteousness for me
so I can come in and give thanks to the Lord!

[20] This is the Lord's gate;
those who are righteous enter through it.

[21] I thank you because you answered me, because you were my saving help.

[22] The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone!

[23] This has happened because of the Lord; it is astounding in our sight!

[24] This is the day the Lord acted; we will rejoice and celebrate in it!

[25] Lord, please save us! Lord, please let us succeed!

[26] The one who enters in the Lord's name is blessed;
we bless all of you from the Lord's house.

[27] The Lord is God! He has shined a light on us!

So lead the festival offering with ropes all the way to the horns of the altar.[a]

[28] You are my God—I will give thanks to you!

You are my God—I will lift you up high!

[29] Give thanks to the Lord because he is good,
because his faithful love lasts forever.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 21:1-11 [CEB]

[21:1] 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.”