



## WHO IS THIS?

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Matthew 21:1-11

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PBCC is not a liturgical church. This is usually regarded as a "good thing." But there are some ways in which we miss out by paying no attention to liturgy. In many liturgies, each Sunday of the year is named, so that one always knows where one is in the church year. Those segments of the Church that follow a liturgical calendar have spent the past five weeks preparing for Easter. Forty days ago they observed Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras. This was not an excuse for a big party; the Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans have nothing to do with the spirit of the church calendar. Shrove Tuesday was the day of preparation for Lent, which began the next day, on Ash Wednesday. The past five Sundays have been marked as the First through Fifth Sundays in Lent. The liturgical calendar has been preparing its followers for today, Palm Sunday, the final Sunday on the approach to Good Friday and Easter.

Instead, here we are, suddenly arrived at Palm Sunday with no preparation. The children who sang for us this morning are the exception. They have spent several weeks preparing for this day, as they rehearsed their songs, and looked forward with eager anticipation to waving their palm branches. We have arrived at Palm Sunday unprepared, but that is not the fault of the Gospel writers. The evangelists devote much space to preparing their readers for the first Palm Sunday.

Jesus conducted most of his ministry in rural Galilee, far from Jerusalem. He focused his attention on a small patch of territory on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here, within an area of less than one square mile, lay the three cities of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Jesus' adopted home Capernaum. It was in these three cities that Jesus performed most of his miracles (Matt 11:20-24). It was here that Jesus chose to live, among the simple fishermen and despised tax collectors, not in Jerusalem among the sophisticated elite.

But there came a time when Jesus could stay away from Jerusalem no longer. The turning point came in Caesarea Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee towards Mount Hermon. Here Peter made his confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt 16:16). Matthew tells us that "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem" (Matt 16:21).

In Matt 19:1 we are told that Jesus "left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan." In the next chapter we read, "Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem...'" (Matt 20:17-18). A few verses later we read, "As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho" (Matt 20:29). Over the space of two chapters, Matthew periodically reminds us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Luke is even more deliberate: he takes ten of his twenty-four chapters to trace Jesus' jour-

ney to Jerusalem. In Luke 9:51 he tells us, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." His journey is not complete until 19:44. The gospel writers go to considerable length to prepare us for the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem brought him southwards along the Jordan River to the city of Jericho. At 850 feet below sea level, Jericho is the lowest city in the world. The road to Jerusalem rises nearly 4000 feet before it crests the Mount of Olives and drops down to Jerusalem at 2600 feet above sea level. If you drive up the modern road from Jericho to Jerusalem, you can still see portions of the ancient Roman road, the same road up which Jesus walked. This was a long, hot, dusty climb. Think of walking up Mount Hamilton, and you'll get the idea. Near the top the road turned south to skirt around the south shoulder of the Mount of Olives. Here, about two miles short of Jerusalem, the road passed through the village of Bethany. Jesus had some very special friends who lived in Bethany: the sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. Jesus stayed the night with these friends, enjoying their refreshing hospitality. Our story begins the next morning as Jesus left Bethany to make the forty-minute walk to Jerusalem.

**As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." (Matt 21:1-3, NIV)**

Just a short distance ahead of Bethany on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem lay the village of Bethphage. As they approached this village, Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead. As soon as they entered the village they would find a donkey and her colt tethered. They were to untie these animals and bring them to Jesus.

**The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. (21:6-7)**

The disciples entered the village and found the two animals, just as Jesus had said. Mark tells us that as the disciples were untying the colt, some people standing by asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" (Mark 11:5). The disciples answered as Jesus had instructed them: "The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly" (Mark 11:3). The disciples brought the donkey and her colt back to Jesus, waiting outside the village. The disciples were wearing cloaks to ward off the chill air of an early spring day at 3000 feet. They now took off these cloaks and spread them on the backs of the two animals. Jesus didn't

get onto the donkey, as the disciples might have expected. Instead, he got onto the colt, the foal of the donkey. This must have looked a funny sight. When a full-grown man rides a donkey, his feet reach to the ground. How much more so when mounted on a donkey's foal!

Jesus and the disciples continued their journey toward Jerusalem: down the western slope of the Mount of Olives, past the olive groves of Gethsemane, across the Kidron Brook, and up the far bank. They did not make this journey alone. The closer they got to the city, the greater the crush of people around them. Jesus and his disciples were just a few of the many pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for Passover.

Next Thursday, Jews all over the world will celebrate Passover. Families and friends will gather together for the Passover Seder, at which they will feast and tell the ancient stories. The youngest at the table will be asked, "Why is tonight different?" The leader will then tell the story of the exodus, of how God liberated his captive people from slavery. In Biblical times the Law required that each year every male go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. For days before the Feast, pilgrims poured into the city from all sides, from Judea, from Galilee, and even beyond. Many brought lambs to offer in the Temple as their Passover sacrifice. Others carried money so that they could buy a lamb when they reached the Temple. It was in the midst of this festive throng that Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem.

Matthew tells us of this crowd:

**A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,**

**"Hosanna to the Son of David!"**

**"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"**

**"Hosanna in the highest!" (21:8-9)**

On the surface, none of these actions was unusual. Festival pilgrims were often welcomed to Jerusalem with cloaks and branches spread on the road. As they made their way, the pilgrims would sing from the Passover hymnbook, the Hallel, consisting of Psalms 113-118. Matthew records them singing a snippet from the last of these hymns. On the surface, all is normal. But Matthew has no doubt that this is a unique event, unlike any Passover pilgrimage ever made. The actions and words of the crowd were true on a much deeper level than they realized. Nine hundred years earlier the Israelites had acclaimed Jehu as the new king of Israel by spreading their cloaks under him (2 Kgs 9:13). Though the crowd surrounding Jesus may not realize it, they are welcoming a king much greater than Jehu. This acclamation is reinforced by their cry,

**"Hosanna to the Son of David!"**

**"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"**

**"Hosanna in the highest!"**

This is drawn from Psalm 118,

**O LORD, save us;**

**O LORD, grant us success.**

**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.**

**From the house of the LORD we bless you.**

**The LORD is God,**

**and he has made his light shine upon us.**

### **With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. (Psa 118:25-27)**

The word translated "save us" in Psa 118:25 is the Hebrew word *Hoshia-na*, transliterated in Greek and English as Hosanna. Literally, it means "save, please," but it came to be a generic exclamation of praise. As the crowd sang, "Hosanna, save us," did they realize that their savior was right now entering Jerusalem? I very much doubt it. The crowd spoke better than it knew. The language of Psalm 118:25-27 was fitting language for pilgrims going up to the house of the Lord. They were coming in the name of the Lord. But both "Son of David" and "the one who comes" were titles for the expected messianic king. Again, the crowd spoke better than it knew.

And so the crowd came to the walls of Jerusalem. A must-see sight for visitors to Israel today is the view of the Old City of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, especially when seen in the light of sunrise. The rising sun casts a golden hue across the Temple Mount and the walls of the Old City. These walls were built in the 16th century by Suleyman the Great, ruler of the Ottoman Empire. Today, 400 years later, the walls are almost entirely intact. About a dozen small gateways allow passage into the city. But midway along the wall on the western side, at what in English is known as the Jaffa Gate, there is a massive breach in the walls. This breach was made in 1898 so that Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany could make a grand entrance with his entourage. The small gate provided by Suleyman was inadequate for the Kaiser's pretensions.

How different it was for Jesus. He did not knock down any walls to make way for his procession. He did not ride in on a horse. He didn't even ride in on a donkey. He entered the city riding the colt of a donkey, with his feet dragging the ground. He entered amidst a throng of pilgrims who little understood the significance of the one in their midst. Nevertheless, his entry caused quite a stir in the city, as Matthew tells us:

**When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"**

**The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." (21:10-11)**

The crowds, many of whom had come from Galilee for the Festival, knew Jesus as the prophet from Nazareth. They had heard of, and perhaps witnessed, the miracles he had performed in Galilee, where he healed the sick, made the lame to walk and the blind to see. Many of the pilgrims would know what Jesus had done the previous morning as he left Jericho, when he restored sight to two blind men. They knew what he had earlier done in Bethany, just two miles back down the road, where he raised Lazarus from the dead. "Who is this?" For the next several days Jerusalem was abuzz with that question.

The disciples, I take it, were befuddled by it all. Though Jesus had several times explained to them that he was going to Jerusalem to be betrayed and killed, the disciples never excelled in their ability to understand. Only belatedly did they realize that this entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem was in fulfillment of OT prophecy (John 12:16).

**This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:**

**"Say to the Daughter of Zion,**

**'See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'** " (21:4-5)

The quotation is from Zech 9:9. Though we don't know the date of the last six chapters of Zechariah, we do know that the first eight chapters were proclaimed around 520 BC. Seventy years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had captured Jerusalem, burnt the Temple, the palace and every other important building, and carried much of the population off to exile in Babylon. Fifty years later, Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon and issued a decree allowing the Jews to return home, where they set about rebuilding their land. God had promised that he would bring a remnant back from exile, and would restore glory to Israel. For Israel to be restored she needed a temple and a king. Among the returned exiles was Zerubbabel, grandson of Jehoiachin, the second-last king of Judah. He had the correct ancestry, but he couldn't function as a king, because Judah was part of another empire. It was an insignificant district in a minor province of the Persian Empire. But the Lord gave Zechariah a message of hope for his people:

**Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!  
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim  
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,  
and the battle-bow will be broken.  
He will proclaim peace to the nations.  
His rule will extend from sea to sea  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.**

(Zech 9:9-10)

The Lord told the exiles to rejoice, for their king was on his way. He was the rightful king. He would remove the weapons of war from Jerusalem and establish universal peace. The disciples recognized that the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was the fulfillment of this promise from 550 years ago. But as Matthew quotes this text, he omits a very significant line. We see throughout his gospel that Matthew is very well acquainted with the Old Testament. His constant theme is to show how the life and ministry of Jesus were in fulfillment of the Scriptures. It was not because Matthew was unfamiliar with Zechariah that he omitted this line. Why then did he omit the statement "righteous and having salvation"?

Normally, the king would enter the capital city having already won the victory. He would enter as the victorious conqueror. King David entered Jerusalem as the conqueror after capturing the city from the Jebusites. The heading in nearly all translations refers to this passage in Matthew, and to the parallel accounts in the other gospels, as the Triumphant Entry. This is the language of the Roman Empire. When a Roman general returned from a successful campaign, the senate would honor him with a Triumph. This wasn't a British sports car. The victorious general would ride into the city at the head of a long column. Included in that column would be not only his victorious troops, but also the vanquished enemy. The Roman citizens would come out and shower their praise on the returning conqueror. The nearest equivalent we have to this is the

ticker-tape parade. Like the triumphal procession through Rome, the ticker-tape parade is an honor bestowed for a great feat already accomplished. But what victory had Jesus accomplished? This is no triumphal entry in the traditional understanding of that term.

It is very clear that, whether the crowd understood it or not, Jesus was entering Jerusalem as its rightful king. But what victory had he won? The Jews were longing for a king. As the crowds cried, "Hosanna, save us," perhaps some of them were thinking, like the Jewish citizens of Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof*, as they are forced out of their homes, "Wouldn't now be a good time for the Messiah to come?" The Jews had no king. Their previous king, Herod the Great, had been an imposter, a man who wasn't even a Jew. They chafed under Roman rule, longing for a king who would defeat the enemy and restore the grandeur of Israel. But they were locked into a worldview that saw Rome as the enemy.

What did Jesus do when he entered Jerusalem? He went straight to the Temple, just like all the other pilgrims. Towering above the far wall of the Temple was the Antonine Fortress, home to a garrison of the hated Roman troops. But Jesus didn't throw these Romans out. Instead he threw the Jewish money changers out of the Temple. What was Jesus doing? Who is this? The focal point of Israel's life was the Temple, the earthly dwelling place of the heavenly God. Earthly responsibility for this Temple lay in the hands of the king. It was the king's job to build the temple. It was the king's job to preserve the purity of the temple, or to restore it if defiled. Most of Judah's kings had defiled the temple with their idolatry, but the occasional good kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah cleansed the temple. Jesus found that instead of being a house of prayer for all nations, the Temple had become a den of robbers. His action with the money changers was an implicit claim to be the king. According to John's account, on this same occasion Jesus made the even more startling claim that he himself was the temple: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). Who is this man?

The Jewish leaders recognized the claims that Jesus was making. As the week wore on, they got more and more steamed over Jesus, until they determined to arrest and kill him. After arresting Jesus, these Jewish leaders stirred up the crowd to ask Pilate for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. How quickly the crowd changed their tune, as we sang earlier:

Sometimes they strew His way,  
and His sweet praises sing;  
resounding all the day,  
hosannas to their King.  
Then: "Crucify!" is all their breath,  
and for His death they thirst and cry.

So it had to be. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, his actions and the acclamation of the crowd showed that he was laying claim to David's throne. But he was not yet the victorious conqueror. The Romans were not the enemy that needed vanquishing. Indeed, the Jews were as much part of the problem as were the Romans. The ultimate enemy was the power of sin and death. In order for Jesus to go into battle against this enemy, it was necessary that his own people reject him, and that they enter into an unholy alliance with the Romans to put him to death. It was from this battle against the power of sin and death that Jesus emerged vic-

torious, as God declared by raising him from the dead. The real Triumphant Entry of Jesus occurred forty days later when he ascended into heaven and sat down on the throne of David at the Father's right hand.

On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem as the rightful king of the Jews. The crowd initially acclaimed him, but then changed their tune and called for his death. It had to be this way. His own people had to reject him and kill him if he was to claim the greater crown as King of kings. This, too, is foretold in the OT. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the crowds around him sang Psalm 118:25-26. Just a few verses earlier in that psalm are the remarkable words,

**The stone the builders rejected  
has become the capstone;  
the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psa 118:22-24)**

Years later, as Peter reflects on these events of which he was an eyewitness, he puts several Scriptures together:

**As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:**

**“See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.”**

**Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,**

**“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the capstone,”**

**and,**

**“A stone that causes men to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.”**

**They stumble because they disobey the message—  
which is also what they were destined for. (1 Pet 2:4-8)**

Peter weaves together three OT quotations: Isa 28:16; Psa 118:22; and Isa 8:14. He had come to understand that these three references to a stone pointed ahead to the living Stone, Jesus Christ. On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem as both the true king of Israel and the true Temple. The Jews ultimately rejected that claim, and put him to death. But God turned the tables on this act of defiance. This stone that the builders rejected, God laid in Zion

as the cornerstone of his new Temple. Upon that cornerstone all God's people, as living stones, are being built into the Church, which is the temple of God.

The stone that the builders rejected was the stone over which they tripped. The Greek word for an obstacle that causes stumbling is *skandalon*; the verb is *skandalizo*. Both words came to be used metaphorically for causing offense. The Jewish leaders were scandalized by what Jesus did. They took offense at his actions and their implicit claims. They understood well enough what he was doing. In stumbling against him, they put him to death. But herein lies the greater scandal: God took the stone that the builders rejected and made it the chief cornerstone. This is the scandal of the gospel, the scandal of the cross. The king that the Jews rejected is now king of all the nations.

But before you can say that you are better than those Jews, let me say that you were there. Throughout the Middle Ages, Easter was a dangerous time for the Jews. In vitriolic sermons during Holy Week, the priests would remind their flock that the Jews were Christ-killers. The authorities would then turn a blind eye as the crowds, whipped into blind rage, went out into the street and attacked any Jews they found. Many were killed. Others were subjected to unspeakable humiliation. What the Christians forgot was that had they been there in Jerusalem, they would have cried out just as loudly as the Jewish crowd for the death of Jesus. Had we been there outside Pilate's palace, we too would have been shouting, “Crucify him!”

Palm Sunday is a day of excitement. We come to watch our children wave their palm branches. But it is also a day for sober reflection. How quickly the acclaim of the crowd turned to hatred. How fickle is my own heart still! As the hymn says, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the Lord I love.” But however much I may stumble, God is faithful. This too is scandalous: God's faithfulness does not depend upon my faithfulness.

“Who is this man?” the crowd asked in Jerusalem. “Who is this man?” I ask you today. Is Jesus still the stone against which you stumble? Or has he become the cornerstone? Is he your king? No matter how loudly you have rejected Christ's claims of kingship, you can still become a living stone built into the structure of which Christ is the cornerstone. Who is this man? Acknowledge today that he is King and Savior. This king who was rejected is the king who went into battle against the greater enemy, and won that greater victory against death and sin. He entered into heaven to sit at the Father's right hand as King of kings and Lord of lords. This is your king. Who is this man? Jesus whom the crowds rejected but God accepted and enthroned on high. This is your king.

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