

**From Cheers to Jeers (Palm Sunday 2020)**  
**Based on Psalm 118:1-2,19-29 and Matthew 21:1-11**

**Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV):**

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.<sup>[a]</sup>”<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*<sup>5</sup> “Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

*<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd<sup>[b]</sup> spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*“Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

*<sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”<sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

Friends, last Sunday we walked with the throngs of pilgrims journeying toward Jerusalem as we joined our voices together with them singing the words from Psalm 130 about watching, waiting, and hoping in the steadfast love and redeeming power of our Lord. Today we have made it up the hill to Jerusalem and squeeze in with what may have been as many as 200,000 pilgrims who are entering this Roman-occupied city to celebrate the Passover, the festival thanking God for their deliverance from slavery and death as told in story of the Exodus. Now their song changes from one of lament to a joyous festival processional song as their ultimate destination within Jerusalem is the Holy Temple. Listen to portions of the beautiful words from Psalm 118 emerging from the voices of the men, women, youth, and children:

*<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!  
<sup>2</sup>Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."*

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*<sup>19</sup>Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.  
<sup>20</sup>This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.  
<sup>21</sup>I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.  
<sup>22</sup>The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.  
<sup>23</sup>This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.  
<sup>24</sup>This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
<sup>25</sup>Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!  
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!  
<sup>26</sup>Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.  
We bless you from the house of the LORD.  
<sup>27</sup>The LORD is God, and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.  
<sup>28</sup>You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.  
<sup>29</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

Still singing and proclaiming that God's steadfast love endures forever, a group breaks from the larger procession and begins to walk toward the East Gate leading into the city. Some of them had been with Jesus since the very beginning in Galilee, others have joined along the way. There are Jesus' followers—Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, Joanna, Mary Magdalene, Susanna, his mother Mary, many whom he had healed from physical illnesses and psychological disturbances, widows, orphans, tax collectors, those who were intrigued by his teachings, the curious. I see the congregants from First Christian Church walk with them.

This group has intentionally chosen to enter into Jerusalem through this particular gate. But why enter through the East Gate? Many people were entering through the West Gate.

After all there was going to be a well publicized procession entering in from the West Gate with none other than the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, parading in on a white war horse with his soldiers and entourage and all the pomp and circumstance associated with that role. He was coming to instill law and order during the Jewish Festival of Passover that brought so many visitors to the city. To get a sense of the feeling around that, we might visualize coronation parades or contemporary military parades like that of North Korea showcasing its military might and rule as soldiers march lockstep as a way to exert authoritarian rule and instill fear.

But even though this was going to be a grand and elaborate spectacle for sure, they had instead gathered at the Eastern Gate to be part of an alternative procession, and waited at that gate for Jesus, the one they loved, the one who had healed them, taught them, challenged them, prayed for them, and enabled them to see what Matthew calls the divine Kingdom of Heaven within and without, the one who challenged the status quo for their lack of justice and mercy, and the one they believed to be a prophet and the Son of David they had been waiting for. Let's listen to what the Gospel of Matthew (21:1-7) tells us about that day:

***When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.***

Note that the activity begins at the Mount of Olives. That's very significant! Matthew knows that his readers might recall that Zechariah (14:1-11) prophesied that the expected Messiah would appear here! Jesus' followers enter Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate. Their enthusiasm was so infectious that others joined with them, wondering what and whom they might be waiting for. Perhaps something akin to a contemporary flash mob began to emerge with people intuiting that something important and amazing was going to happen, but weren't sure exactly what. They hoped it would be more sensational and worth their wait than seeing Pilate on a white war horse accompanied by his entourage.

A synergistic energy and collective excitement continued to arise as they looked and then perhaps gasped in confusion or even dismay as they saw a strange site. A rather ordinary man, perhaps in his early thirties, simply dressed, came riding down the main street leading from the gate into the city not just on a donkey but on a donkey and a colt! No white war horse? Just two lowly, humble animals. Why is he doing that, they wondered? Well, even those in the lower middle class could afford those kinds of animals. He wasn't royal. He was just a regular person like them.

But what's the deal with riding on two animals at once? Was this some kind of a circus act like the ones where someone comes riding into the arena with one foot on each of two horses? Was he trying to show off some acrobatic trick? Oh, that's right! I remember! Now we understand, they said to each other! Our prophet Zechariah (9:9) said we would recognize it was our king because he would be "humble, and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."<sup>1</sup>

As a side note here: Mark and Luke don't feel the need to have Jesus fulfill Zechariah's prophecy quite literally so that the king would come riding on a donkey and a colt. They probably realize that later readers would be troubled by this literal interpretation of prophecy (not to mention the trouble children's directors would have using Matthew's version for Palm Sunday skits with children, even though I know the kids at FCC would take us up on that challenge and maybe we could ask them to do that next year)! Mark and Luke, who are perhaps more open to metaphorical interpretations or even mistakes by scribes in their Hebrew scriptures, have Jesus just enter Jerusalem riding a donkey. But Matthew, throughout his entire Gospel account, sometimes even to the point of the ridiculous, has everything at stake in having Jesus live out quite literally prophetic statements from the Hebrew scriptures, including those in Psalm 118.

Bit by bit the crowd gets caught up in the disciples' joy, love, and adulation of this man Jesus, who was almost providing a theological parody of Caesar's parade of a warrior king as this gentle king Jesus challenged the Empire's spiritual principalities and political powers by the way he entered into Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>9</sup> 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,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The crowd, perhaps continuing to sing some of the words of Psalm 118, joined with the disciples and may have felt compelled by some force outside themselves to roll out a kind of red carpet for this man to ride upon. It seems that they spontaneously put down their coats and leaves from trees on the road Jesus would ride down. Matthew's Gospel tells us that: *<sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

Hosanna! I know we might think this means something like Hurray! Or Yay! Or perhaps Hail the King! But Hosanna means "Save us!" "Save us King Jesus, Son of David." Save us from all that troubles us internally: our fears both real and imagined, our phobias, all we are ashamed of in thought, word and deed, our pettiness, our jealousy, our anger, our self loathing and inner voices of criticism, our resentments and lack of forgiveness that imprison us, our judgmental attitudes.

Hosanna! Save us, King Jesus, from all that ails us externally! The oppression we feel from the Roman occupiers who tax us and just see us as pawns to be manipulated for their own ends. Who care only about the economy but not about individual human beings. Who are interested in filling their own pockets for personal gain but don't care about the greater common good.

Save us from unjust religious institutions that expect us to disregard science and truth, recite creeds as our sign of orthodoxy, and have closed minds and hearts. Save us from greed, systemic racism, sexism, poverty, misguided nationalism, politicking. Waving palms can be a highly subversive political act in which one rejects Caesar's political parade and instead confesses allegiance to God's vision for our world as symbolized by humble and lowly King Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt!

As the crowd became larger and more vocal it began to resemble less of something like the Macy's Day Thanksgiving Parade and more of a protest movement crying out for justice. Like those who followed Mahatma Gandhi in his salt march in India to protest British colonial rule, or Martin Luther King Jr's march on Washington for civil rights, or the student-led demonstrations calling for democracy, free speech, and a free press in the Tiananmen Square protests in China, or the contemporary youth environmental movement inspired by the amazing 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that day we remember as Palm Sunday morphed into becoming a crowd-led protest movement crying out to Jesus, the one they now recognized as the Son of David, to save them from the injustices that oppressed them. The festal processional Psalm that they had been singing as they waved palms may have taken on new meaning as applied to Jesus:

<sup>22</sup>*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

<sup>25</sup>*Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!*

*O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!*

<sup>26</sup>*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.*

The crowds who were throwing down their cloaks and branches from trees on the road before Jesus and shouting *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”* must have created quite a sensation. Matthew says that there was another group in addition to the crowd gathered around Jesus. There also was “the city.” The establishment. Those from or appointed by Rome who oversaw the city’s economic activity and extended their Empire building through collecting unreasonably high taxes. Those who needed to maintain order by keeping people in line. The religious leaders who had to maintain a Temple that was not just a religious center but a secular business establishment that had bills that needed to be paid. “The city” noticed what was happening and moved into a state of high alert. After all, they had experienced mobs getting out of control before.

Matthew (vs. 10) summarizes the city’s reaction with these words: “when [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was **in turmoil**.” Biblical scholars say that we English speakers, when we hear the word “turmoil,” don’t really understand how strong the city’s reaction was. We English speakers understood turmoil to be “a state of great disturbance, confusion, or uncertainty.” That’s definitely a bad condition to be in, isn’t it? I would say that our world is in turmoil right now as we globally face the covid-19 pandemic.

But Matthew is speaking of a disturbance and upheaval far greater than that when he uses the word *seio* (turmoil) not just to describe the reaction of the crowd to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem but also to depict the shaking of the earth when Jesus breathed his last on the cross (Matt 27:51).

The Biblical scholar Mary Hinkle Shore has said that “The details of the story—the donkey and colt, the cloaks, the crowds, the shouts of ‘Hosanna!’—signal that something astonishing, hopeful, and frightening is happening. Tectonic plates are shifting.”<sup>2</sup>

This is an earth shaking, planetary changing moment of cosmic proportions and “the city” senses this and is afraid. “Who is this?” everyone asks? Matthew had posed this very same question earlier in his Gospel when, in Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:13-14) Jesus asks his disciples in a private conversation: “Who do you say I am?”. Simon Peter answered: “Jesus, you are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.” Here the question is again posed, not just to Jesus’ inner circle, but to the entire city? Indeed, to all of us? “Who is this?” Matthew says that: <sup>11</sup>***The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”***

Prophets, appointed by God, could be troublemakers as they spoke truth to power. As they gave voice and pointed out the injustices of the secular rulers and religious leaders. Prophets challenged the priests’ authority.

The city was in turmoil as they heard the crowds saying Jesus was a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. The city’s secular and religious authorities did not want any prophetic troublemakers crashing the Passover festivities. They were worried about the crowds.

Now crowds, we know, can be very fickle. There is a herd mentality around crowds as they feed off collective energy. They can get caught up in things that can take on a life of its own. Peer pressure. Anger feeds on anger. Fear unleashes fear. Panic and even mass hysteria can set in. We can see this by looking at some contemporary political rallies. We have seen over history the dangerous toxic mix that can be created through the combination of a confused, anxious, despairing people and an authoritarian ruler with an axe to grind. Martin Luther King Jr. himself knew this when he wrote that:

***“Crowd pressures have unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo. Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance, and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause and never to be found in a minority of two or three.”***

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew Volume 2, Chapters 14-28* [Louisville, WJK, 2013], pp. 143, 145.

We can't always trust crowds. Martyn Percy says that "this is the problem of Palm Sunday. It is the very behavior of the crowd that is worrying. Jesus moves from a position of having gained little recognition to one in which he is being crowned as 'the people's king.' Holy Week begins here because it is obvious that those who set him up will [bring] him down. That is how crowds work. Any politician, celebrity, or sports star will testify that crowds, bound together in adulation, can quickly turn nasty, especially if you do not meet their expectation."<sup>3</sup>

And what was the crowd's expectation? Was it not for a conquering warrior king, who would overthrow the hated Roman occupiers and restore Israel to the independence it had known under King David perhaps through military means? Was violence not part of the equation? Did Jesus meet the crowd's expectation? We know that crowd's shouts can turn suddenly from cheers to jeers! From "Hosanna, Save Us!" to "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!"

On this first day leading into Holy Week, which part of the crowd do you belong to? What are you shouting out? "Hosanna! Save Us!"? Or "Crucify Him? Crucify Him!"? As you follow Jesus this week, will you be one of those who will break free from the mob mentality of the larger crowd? Join with him in an Upper Room for a final meal as he washes your feet and gives you a new commandment to love one another? Suffer his betrayal? Wait with him while he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane? Witness his arrest, trial, and beating? Weep with his mother, the other women, and his beloved disciple John at the foot of the cross? And, finally, what will you say in response to Jesus' question: Who do you say that I am?

**Closing Prayer:** *King Jesus, today is an especially difficult day to stay isolated at home either alone or with our family. Today is a day perhaps more than any other in the church year when we want to join together with others in community to reenact Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as we have a fellowship breakfast, as we wave palm branches, as we watch our children, youth, and choir process into our sanctuary, as we all shout out "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!", as we enjoy our children's Palm Sunday Skit. We want to be part of a crowd today. Even the introverts among us would like to leave our homes and mingle with others to be part of this celebratory parade.*

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<sup>3</sup> *Resources for Preaching and Teaching Year A*, Louisville: WJK, 2004, p. 117



*Lord, today once more you have opened up the gates of righteousness, as we remember again you, King Jesus, riding through the gates of the city of Jerusalem and down its streets with everyone proclaiming, "Hosanna! Save us!" And we join our voices with those of all times and places as we say "Hosanna! Save us!"*

*Hosanna! Save us, King Jesus, from all that prevents us from becoming everything that you have called us to be; save us from those attitudes that create division rather than peace; save us from our pettiness; from our arrogance; from our selfishness; from our resentments and jealousies and anger.*

*Hosanna! Save our nation, King Jesus, from its self-righteousness; from its greed; from its waywardness and destructive ways.*

*Hosanna! Save our world, King Jesus, from the global pandemic we are in the midst of!*

*Hosanna! Save us, King Jesus, and help us to see that you are the stone that the builders have rejected; that you are the chief cornerstone; that you are the Messiah, the one that the prophets of old spoke of and whom the Hebrews waited for; and you are the one who can fill the emptiness in our lives today.*

*Hosanna! Save us, King Jesus, from betraying you as you continue on the road that leads to the cross.*

*And from that cross hear our cries and our prayers, King Jesus, for healing and hope for all those whose names we have lifted up today during our time of concerns and for all that we hold in our hearts. Amen.*

Now may the love of God, and the grace we have in Jesus, and the hope and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all week long.

"Go now in peace. Never be afraid.

God will go with you each hour of every day.

Go now in faith, steadfast, strong and true.

Know He will guide you in all you do.

Go now in love, and show you believe.

Reach out to others so all the world can see.

God will be there, watching from above.

Go now in peace, in faith and in love."