

Those Pesky Romans
Matthew 21:1-11
Colebrook Congregational Church
April 9, 2017 / Palm Sunday

[The delivered sermon differed somewhat from the below]

There are four Gospels telling us four versions of Jesus' story, and rarely are all four in agreement. One of those times is the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. They all agree on the big picture, with only minor differences in details. Leading up to this point, we have mostly heard John's version, where the reason for the Sanhedrin starting to conspire against Jesus was the Raising of Lazarus, right before this story. However, in the other three, the cause of that animosity from the Sanhedrin comes right after the Triumphal Entry. Either way, it does not change that when Jesus went to Jerusalem that final time, He knew what was about to happen to Him, how it was going to end, and yet, He persevered. He continued on His mission.

Now, Jerusalem was not a safe place for certain kinds of people at that time. I did the history of the area a few weeks ago, where the Holy Land was repeatedly conquered, and by the time of Jesus, the Judeans had only been in control of their own affairs for about 50yrs between the collapse of Alexander the Great's Empire and the Roman Invasion. That was about 60yrs before Jesus' birth. Because of this, the populace had been looking for and yearning for the Messiah to appear and deliver them from their troubles. And there were two impressions of who and what that Messiah would be. Either the one would restore the Torah and Israel; or a military leader that will raise an army and liberate the land from their oppressors.

Here's why this context is important: Those pesky Romans had taken over, and they didn't like people rising up and rebelling. Judea was a vassal state at that time, which is why there was all that back and forth between Pontius Pilate and King Herod. And Pontius Pilate only had some cohorts and auxiliaries at his command, and since the Judeans were prone to rebelling, he needed to squash anything even remotely resembling a revolt quickly, or he might not survive. Even if a revolt expelled those forces, Judea was surrounded by six legions, so the Romans would take back control eventually. Shortly after the death of Jesus, it did become necessary to the

Romans to take direct control of Judea, and they stationed three entire legions in Palestine, with four more nearby in Syria.

To put that in perspective, the Roman province of Britain also had three legions. One protecting the coast from Irish raiders, one protecting the Wall from Scottish raiders, and one to control the general populace. That province was over six times the size of Judea, yet Judea required the same amount of legions, not counting all the auxiliaries.

There were so many soldiers in the Holy Land. Tens of thousands. This was because the Judeans were fierce warriors, therefore the Roman legionaries had to be on alert at all times, constantly vigilant. Before their final destruction, the Judeans demolished three legions and it took four legions just to take Jerusalem.

In the midst of all this, people are talking about and expecting a Messiah to appear at any time and deliver them and expel the invaders. As the invaders, the Romans wanted to put a stop to that before things could get out of hand, so they were keeping a keen eye out for any Messiah or rebellion in general.

Matthew knew this, and that is why he went the extra mile to back up his description of the Triumphal Entry with the imagery and prophesy of not a military messiah, but a meek king who brings peace.

When Jesus gets near to Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives, which is just east of the City, He sends a couple Disciples to neighboring Bethany, the village of Mary, Martha, & Lazarus, for a donkey and its colt. The instructions that Jesus gives them suggest that this borrowing was pre-arranged. And then Matthew makes sure that we know that the Prophet Zechariah foretold this, if we did not catch on from Jesus' actions alone.

That prophesy describes a king of peace, who had no intention of exercising force. What person with intentions of military might rides on a donkey instead of a war steed? This is to make clear to all who see this that Jesus was not taking part in the fanatical nationalism that frightened and angered the Roman occupiers.

However much that Jesus wanted to show that He had no intention of being an earthly king, His enthusiastic followers had different ideas. They spread their cloaks on the path before Him, like when one of the Old Testament kings was proclaimed king. And then there were the branches spread on the road and waved around. These were myrtle and willow, along with palms. This sort of thing was part of the processions at the Feast of Tabernacles, but also in Greco-Roman triumph marches, which would not go over well if the Roman authorities saw this.

Then the crowd shouted, “Hosanna!” This word is associated with part of the rituals for the Feast of Tabernacles and also Chanukah. They also shout part of Psalm 118, which was our Unison Reading today.

Matthew concludes by emphasizing that the crowd takes Jesus as a prophet, to indicate that this demonstration was not a political one, and therefore require a response from the already jumpy Roman authorities. Prophets had a role and place in that society, they were given a certain latitude to challenge rulers and erratic and zealous behavior was expected from them.

But Jesus is not just a prophet. He is the Messiah and Son of God. And He had a mission to fulfill. He knew that He would encounter all kinds of adversity, and He met them head on, faithfully. He persevered when facing certain danger at the hands of the Romans in pursuit of His Mission. That is an example to follow when we face adversity in our own lives.

Like many parents of young children, I've had to watch the most recent Disney movie, Moana, about the Polynesian people and their mission to explore the oceans as far as they can go. This movie has sparked interest in the Polynesians and their stories and I found an interesting story about their perseverance and the discovery of Hawaii.

Hawaii was discovered some time around AD 1000 by a group of seafaring Polynesians who inhabited and explored many of the islands in the South Pacific. If you look at a map of the world, you'll notice that Hawaii is one of the most isolated spots on the planet. So it's already incredible that it was discovered at such an early date. How they got there is a story of great perseverance.

Because of its isolation, they would never have known Hawaii was even there. They suspected it was there. They noticed a bird called the Golden Plover which migrated north out into the open water every year. Land must have been out there somewhere – they just couldn't see it. So they set sail from the Marquesas Island to follow them into the unknown. That island is as close as you can get to Hawaii, but it's still about 2500 miles away. Nowadays it takes roughly 30 days to sail to Hawaii from Marquesas using modern equipment.

Back then, they were only using carved wooden boats and their own reckoning of naval navigation.

The Polynesians followed the birds closely, but they always flew faster than they could paddle. They could only keep up with them for short distances.

At some point, they would lose track and have to turn back. Each year they would try again, picking up where they left off the previous year. Years passed by and they kept getting farther into the Pacific. But still they never saw land. It took the Polynesians 400 years, but they finally reached Hawaii through their perseverance in the face of the dangers of the open ocean, isolated from land and safety.

When we are confronted with adversity in our own lives, let Jesus be the example we follow. Jesus persevered in His mission to save us all, no matter what the Romans could do to hurt and hinder Him. He refused to be untrue to His task. Like Jesus, we should not fear the difficult paths, nor should we give up easily when something goes awry. We should follow Jesus' example of perseverance, no matter what, pursuing what is right, and doing what God

has Called each of us to do.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

O Christ, you entered the city as a modest man, not in style but simply. Yet still you caused uproar, and questions everywhere; you drew the expectations of a hungry crowd, and brought buried conflicts to the light. May we, when faced with adversity, not fear it, for we know You are with us; and may we hold fast to the gospel of peace and justice; and follow faithfully in Your way of perseverance in compassion and solidarity with those who are in need or excluded, wherever it may lead us. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

God of compassion, You know our faults and yet You promise to forgive. Help us to face up to ourselves, so that, as You move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to You, and receive mercy;

We offer our prayers for our neighbors and loved ones. We pray for those whose lives are broken by distress, by fear, by anger, by pain, or by illness. We pray for the victims of war and senseless violence, that the cruelty end soon. We ask that You gently touch their lives by Your Spirit, bringing Your warmth and comfort, to bring restoration to fractured lives and souls.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. Give us the strength & perseverance to live through any disappointments and the courage to overcome obstacles. Fill us with Your Spirit and make us living carriers of of Your Love to all who need it. Grant us the calmness and serenity needed in this chaotic world.

We especially pray for:
The Stone Family
The Suddath Family

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

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

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, **"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."** The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!"** When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."