

“Who Is This?”  
Sermon Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

Matthew 21:1-11  
April 17, 2011  
For Private Distribution Only

Last year, because I had only arrived in town the week before, we celebrated Palm/Passion Sunday in one fell swoop. This year is a little different: We are hosting a Lenten breakfast this coming Wednesday morning. We will be re-enacting the Last Supper at a simple service on Thursday evening. And several of our members are playing significant roles in a community-wide Good Friday service on Friday evening... This year we have the opportunity to walk through Holy Week in real time, instead of rushing through it in a one-hour roller coaster ride of a service... As busy as I know your lives are, I do hope that you will try to attend as many of these events as you are able. As a back-up, I will also e-mail brief Holy Week reflections and questions to ponder each day...

What I want to avoid perpetuating is the impression that the ideal Christian life is a matter of moving seamlessly from one triumph to the next: that one week we have a raucous parade and the next a joyous Easter celebration with *no pain, no challenge or heartbreak* in between. Each year Holy Week poignantly reminds us just how personally Jesus can relate to the physical and emotional pain we encounter regularly as finite human beings living in a broken world, and to the persecution we *may* undergo when we speak truth to power, standing up for what we believe is of God over and against the ways of the world. It reminds us that God has experienced heartache firsthand in the death of a cherished son. Some “feel good” philosophers and prosperity gospel preachers would have us believe that, if we’re thinking only *positive* thoughts or fully obeying God, *nothing* painful or bad or financially challenging will ever happen to us in our earthly lives. Holy Week begs to differ, painting a very different picture of the rocky path

where life, love, loyalty, and integrity *might* take us, but reassuring us that God will never forsake us or leave our sides no matter how bad our inner and outer circumstances get.

But I digress... Let's venture back to Palm Sunday...

The events of Palm Sunday appear in all four of the gospels. Matthew's version is unique in that it draws direct parallels to Old Testament prophecies in Zechariah and Isaiah, even quoting Zechariah directly:

*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. (Zechariah 9:9, NRSV)*

It is this particular reference that many scholars claim is responsible for rendering Matthew's Palm Sunday procession one of the more peculiar. Did you notice—or did your mind filter out—the fact that here Jesus is said to be riding a donkey and a colt, just as Zechariah's prophecy references both a donkey and her foal? Some have laughed at Matthew's literalism—imagine Jesus, circus-like, straddling two donkeys! Some have even tried to use as evidence of biblical fallibility Matthew's apparent ignorance of *Semitic parallelism*, a Hebrew poetic technique commonly used to describe a single object in two different ways. But there is a third option. Might Matthew have simply meant that Jesus rode the adult donkey, while the foal followed along at her side? Suddenly the image is *less laughable than lovely*.

And yet an element of parody remains. For, according to theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, this Palm Sunday parade was intended to mimic Pontius Pilate's annual procession into Jerusalem--a militaristic, triumphal entry with war horse, chariot, and weapons--

in the days before Passover to remind Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. Such a demonstration would have been especially relevant at Passover since it is a celebration of the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. Thus, Jesus' donkey ride, juxtaposed with Pilate's procession, would have been received as subversive, reminding all those waving palm branches that Rome was the new Egypt, and the Emperor the new Pharaoh.

In contemporary terms, it might look a bit like the "Rally to Restore Sanity" that was staged in Washington by comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert this past fall. That event drew almost a quarter of a million people who apparently shared a sense of frustration at the seeming insanity of how much of our government runs... A basic definition of sanity is whether a person is in touch with reality, with how things really are; and many feel like politicians are largely *out of touch* with the realities of average Americans' daily lives. And so citizens responded en masse to the public satirization and lampooning of Washington's petty power struggles. The whole event could be described as a "public liturgy," and I believe similar sentiments drew the palm-waving crowds to see Jesus entering Jerusalem, not militaristically on a war horse, but nonviolently on a mother donkey. And I imagine the basic dreams motivating the two crowds were also much the same: peace, hope for the common good, an alternative to the broken system at hand.

But in many ways, lampooning and satire are the easy part. The next day for Jesus meant not a bus ride home to the normalcy of everyday life. No, he continued along the trajectory that had begun with his unusual entry into Jerusalem. In his next act, he overturned the tables in the Temple to interrupt business as usual. As indicated by the odd symbolism of the fig tree that follows this week's Gospel lesson, Jesus' issue was that the current religious and political

establishment, like the troublesome fig tree, *wasn't bearing fruit*. And so suddenly, we find Jesus making increasingly public and controversial demonstrations in Jerusalem at the height of the pilgrimage season, as opposed to merely teaching in small villages around Galilee as he had done previously.

The passion and anger he inherited from the Hebrew prophets before him led him to take greater and greater risks in order to demonstrate the contrast between the status quo and the *kingdom* of God. These risks led directly to Jesus' tragic death.

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Although discipleship can indeed be costly, this is not to say that following Jesus necessarily means we too will face torture or tragic deaths. St. Francis of Assisi, Clarence Jordan, and Dorothy Day followed Jesus in radical, controversial ways...and died of old age.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, theologian John Mabry has written that

*Rosa Parks is an imitator of Christ, not because she suffered for taking her stand (or keeping her seat, in her case), but because she had the courage to believe in her own dignity and fought for it in spite of the conflict that resulted.*

*Nelson Mandela is an imitator of Christ, not because he suffered in prison, but because he held out for peace and justice, and led a nation to resurrection.*

*In each case it is not the suffering that is redemptive, but the courage to pursue justice in the face of pain and evil.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Gregg, Carl: "Jesus, a Donkey, and Jon Stewart's Rally for Sanity," *Patheos* 2011, April 8, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> John Mabry, *Crisis And Communion: The Remythologization Of The Eucharist*, Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2005, 129.

In Jesus' case, he began the day and week as something of a *clown* for God and the common people, became increasingly outspoken as the hours wore on...and ended the week martyred on a cross.

But what about the Palm Sunday crowds? On Sunday they were giving Jesus the royal treatment, waving palms and throwing down a red carpet of cloaks into his path. They were shouting, "Hosanna!" or, "Save us, we pray!" --Language reserved for God and divinely ordained kings, indicating they were *fairly* certain that Jesus was their long awaited messiah—the one sent by God to rescue them once and for all from their religious and political oppressors.

The donkey thing may have come as a surprise when they were anticipating a man of King David's stature, but, well, it *was* funny! Nothing like a messiah with a sense of humor! Trashing the tables of the money changers and the animal sacrifice salesmen, not so much.

The truth is, we don't know for sure whether Sunday's crowd went into hiding as the events of that day and week unfolded...or if they were part of the angry mob that would soon cry, "Crucify him!" Some claim those were two distinctly different groups, that Sunday's supporters consisted of peasants who would *never* have crossed over. This may be so, but presumably they weren't there actively defending or seeking Jesus' release either. Crowds—people--are fickle things. Peer pressure doesn't end in high school. And the fear at its core is a powerful deterrent. Even Jesus' inner circle couldn't quite hold up under its force. And yet, fickle, disloyal or not, Jesus loved them enough to stay the course, to follow through on his commitments even when he'd been all but abandoned.

Truth be told, the *mother donkey* may have been Jesus' most reliable companion that day—a model Christopher or “Christ-bearer.” What exactly does that mean?

- Faithful service, even when it's a burden.
- Humble service; not caring who gets the glory, resisting a “hero” image.
- Following directions: being willing to go wherever Christ wants to go.
- Not getting spooked by the crowds, the noise, the attention.
- Never asking Christ to “get off our backs.”
- Being obedient to the will of the One who holds the reins.<sup>3</sup>

As the Palm Sunday parade recedes and even the “Rally to Restore Sanity” becomes a distant memory, as we retrace Jesus' footsteps to the cross one more time, we must ask ourselves just who we are and will be in this world:

- The fearful crowd and disciples
- The angry mob
- Or the trusty donkey

It's often difficult to predict how we will respond in the moment, but we can do our best to prepare ahead as Jesus did, grounding ourselves in God right here, right now, as well as the knowledge that, no matter what our human neighbors might do, God will never ever abandon us along the way.

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<sup>3</sup>“Christopher,” *Homiletics Online*, March 20, 2005.