### “Mounted on a Donkey” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 2, 2023

**Matthew 21:1–11**

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2saying 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. 3If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.” 4This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 “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.” 6The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The 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!” 10When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

**Matthew 26:31–35**

31Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ 32But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” 33Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” 34Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” 35Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

Welcome to First Church on Palm Sunday, one of the most important and historic days in the church calendar. As you might expect, this day is associated with a large set of biblical texts, first the story of the Triumphal Entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, and then a large group of texts that have to do with the Last Supper, the betrayal, the arrest, and the Passion, that is, the suffering and death of Jesus.

Let’s first look at the Triumphal Entry. We start with the story of the donkey, and the narrator tells us that this was “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’” (Matt 21:4–5; Zech 9:9). This is the prophecy of world peace and of a peace Messiah from the prophet Zechariah, chapter 9. In that chapter, a messianic king figure comes, but not riding on a warhorse, as one would expect of a king, but on a donkey, something a peasant would ride. Further, Zechariah goes on, “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (9:10).

Zechariah’s prophecy is of a peace king who will bring an end to war, who will remove armaments from Israel and Judah and will command peace to all the nations, from sea to sea, which means from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, and from the River to the ends of the earth, which means from the Euphrates to all distant lands. It’s a way of saying “he will bring peace to the whole world.” Indeed, when Jesus lives in our hearts, he brings peace and understanding.

This is a remarkable promise, in Zechariah’s time, in Jesus’ time, and for *our* time. Jesus goes out of his way to act out the fulfillment of this prophecy, thus identifying with the mission of the Peace King, humbly riding on a donkey. The Gospel of John, when it tells the same story, says that his disciples did not understand what he was doing until after the Resurrection (John 12:16). Presumably, they only then recognized the intentional reference to Zechariah’s peace prophecy.

As Jesus and the apostles enter Jerusalem, his supporters in the city have evidently gathered in some numbers. The crowds standing along the roadside are singing Psalm 118, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Ps 118:26; Matt 21:9), but in their enthusiasm they have added something not present in the psalm, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” The occasion is treated as the triumphal entry of a king, as we also see in the other three gospels’ versions of the same story. The people are excited. There had not been a Davidic king for six centuries, and many of these people see Jesus as fitting the bill.

This talk of a “son of David,” which Jesus discouraged, is what got the Jewish authorities worked up (Matt 21:15). It sounded like a threat to their authority. But Jesus didn’t always suppress the messianic enthusiasm of his followers. This occasion was one where they *had* to get excited, evidently, and he let them. This was a proper reception for the Messiah. Even without such a demonstration, the attitude of the priests and Pharisees was going to make a confrontation inevitable.

Jesus, in fact, brought the battle to them when he drove the traders and sellers out of the temple courts. The most complete story is in Mark, where Jesus says “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17). He objects not only to their using the temple courts to make money, but also to their excluding of Gentiles. Jesus is quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 to make his point, and is functioning as a prophet, himself. In fact, the crowd identifies him as the prophet from Nazareth (21:11).

As a prophet, he perpetuates the world peace message written by the prophet Zechariah. As elsewhere in the Gospel story, Jesus rejects nationalism, and lets it be known that he will command peace for all humanity. In Mark, Jesus says “the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations” (13:10), and that “the good news is proclaimed in the whole world” (14:9). In Matthew, Jesus tells the apostles to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19). In Luke, he says “forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). In John, he prays that believers may be unified, “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23). In summary, he pictures himself as a Prince of Peace for all peoples.

Our second reading from Matthew is from Thursday of this week, on the night we now call Maundy Thursday, and it stands in contrast to the Triumphal Entry. At the Last Supper Jesus lets the apostles know that they will all be deserters later that night, thus fulfilling a less welcome prophecy from Zechariah, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered” (26:31; Zech 13:7). This is a shocking statement, and Peter vehemently rejects it, so Jesus has to tell him that before the cock crows, he will deny him three times. All the other apostles also deny that they will desert him. Jesus foretells the Resurrection, and what will happen thereafter. He says “after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee” (26:32).

Indeed, the apostles, with the exception of John, will go into hiding while the crucifixion happens. They are afraid for their lives, understandably. John is allowed to follow along with Jesus, as a friend and a witness, but is not allowed to interfere.

I think we can take two very different lessons from these readings. The first story tells us that some of the common people of Jerusalem are honest and faithful listeners, loyal to Jesus, though they may not know much about him. The second story tells us that even some of Jesus’ closest followers will not, at first, risk their lives in following him. They will become more brave after the Spirit of Truth is poured out at Pentecost. Jesus knows all of this in advance. He is not overly concerned about Peter’s lapse of courage.

We, too, are probably inclined to be fearful and cautious, until such time as we really take the Spirit to heart and decide to pursue God’s will with a passion. This should include teaching and exemplifying Jesus’ love and his openness to all nationalities and classes. We never know who might be a Good Samaritan. We don’t want to be contemptuous toward someone whom Jesus would uplift and praise.

We must strive to be good and faithful believers who will stand up for truth and oppose cruelty and violence. If the flame of love burns in our hearts, then the flame of courage will also burn. Peter, empowered by the Spirit, will later become a brave spokesman for the good news, proclaiming that it is for all peoples to receive, and that God had shown him “that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Peter had his heart turned around several times, first by spending time with Jesus, then after his denial when he saw that Jesus forgave him, again when he received the Spirit at Pentecost and became a brave evangelist, and then again when the Spirit revealed to him that he should not consider the Gentiles unclean. *We* may have instances where we were weak, but where God’s forgiveness and generosity made us open our eyes and see things differently. Be willing to hear the old, old story and walk along with Jesus. Be always ready to be turned around, till by turning, turning, you come round right.