“***Not by Might***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Mar. 21, 2020

**Zechariah 4:5–6**

5Then the angel who talked with me . . . 6said to me, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”

**John 12:12–16**

12The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

14Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

16His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

It is not Palm Sunday yet, but there are so many events for that day, that I wanted to treat one of them *this* week, and another one next week. To fully appreciate today’s story, it is necessary to realize how much the Bible *meant* to the Jews, and how saturated their minds were with biblical images and passages. When a crowd of supporters decided to welcome Jesus, they did it with words from Psalm 118, probably singing the familiar psalm as they put out palm branches of welcome for him. It is one of the royal psalms, so they are really welcoming Jesus as a king. We don’t know how thoughtful these followers were. It is possible that many of them were just caught up in the group excitement, and were not really his disciples. Some of them may also have gotten caught up in the Sanhedrin-led mob later in the week that called for Jesus to be crucified. There are always some who can be swept up and led by a crowd.

In any case, by riding in on a donkey, Jesus is *deliberately* fulfilling a passage from the radical, peace-loving prophet Zechariah, which reads “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. 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” (Zech 9:9–10). Jesus could have chosen any number of militaristic passages, where the Messiah is said to smite the nations. Instead, he chooses a passage that speaks of the battle-bow being cut off, and the Messiah commanding peace to the nations. If you didn’t know who Jesus was, but you knew your Bible, you would catch the significance of Jesus’ action.

If Jesus is to be understood as the Messiah, it must be as the Peace Messiah and the World Messiah. Jesus seems to be accepting the symbolism of kingship, but only if it is understood as a Peace King. In a way, these symbolic actions of Jesus are more clear than any of his sayings, for his sayings can be redacted, edited in such a way that their meaning is subtly changed. We can see some examples of these changes between the gospels. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt 5:3) is not the same as “Blessed are you who are poor” (Luke 6:20). And again, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her” (Mark 10:11) is not the same as “whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another commits adultery” (Matt 19:9). We don’t know which version was original and which was edited, but one of the gospels in these cases has changed the meaning. But at this moment of his entry to Jerusalem, you cannot mistake what Jesus’ meaning is when he deliberately fulfills Zech 9:9, embodying a king who would cut off the chariot and command peace to the nations. The message is clear: I am the Peace Messiah, and you should treat each other peacefully.

There’s another great spiritual passage from Zechariah, although we have no record of Jesus quoting it. It is where an angel passes on the Lord’s word: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit.” In a way, this could be God’s answer to the question, “how do you do things?” He gets them done by spiritual power, not by military force. It is something that the social leader of Judah in Zechariah’s time, Zerubbabel, needs to know. He is not a king; this is after the end of the Jewish kingship. But Zerubbabel still could have aroused a military force, if he chose, even though the Jews are under the Persian Empire at this time. The prophet is saying don’t do that, or at least, that’s not the way God is acting. It is a great teaching about God’s method. God acts by the *spiritual* method! God acts in the minds and hearts of people, with spiritual power. God persuades with spirit and with truth. Such Old Testament passages show us that the Hebrews had a concept of the spirit. In the Psalms we have someone praying “do not take your holy spirit from me” (Ps 51:11). And the character Elihu says in the Book of Job: “truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding” (Job 32:8). So the idea of God using spiritual power within the individual to instill wisdom and understanding was already present in the Old Testament, before the bestowing of an additional spirit on Pentecost, after Jesus’ Ascension.

Jesus affirms this emphasis on spiritual help, as when he tells the woman at the well, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). He is making a contrasting statement to the woman’s belief that it was important in which temple one chose to worship. He is saying that outward factors, such as dress or posture or temple or group affiliation do not matter. “But . . . the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). And we, too, should seek to *live* by spirit and truth, by love and justice.

What is meant by Spirit? We get some answers from the passage about the Spirit found in Galatians: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22–23). These are the values and the character virtues that we should all cultivate, and which the Spirit nurtures within us—both the spirit that was present in Old Testament times and the new spirit that Jesus poured out.

Jesus emphasizes these ethical, harmonious, and kindly values of the Spirit. He also affirms the inwardness of true worship, as opposed to worshipping at the supposedly right location. And now, on this occasion when a crowd celebrates his entry to Jerusalem, Jesus performs a teaching action that goes against the political biases and material hopes of that crowd.

The disciples had an experience of coming to understand something Jesus said or did only much later. Maybe we are that way, too. In the course of our faith walk, we come to understand principles that were there all along, but which we misunderstood. Perhaps we never realized that Jesus was a Peace Messiah. Perhaps we never contemplated how he fulfilled another Old Testament passage, the one that says “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit.” Maybe we are only beginning to get a concept of what “Spirit” is. If so, then we are like the original disciples, learning new lessons all the time, perhaps feeling foolish for not having understood before. But Jesus is patient with his sheep. He knows we’re slow learners. Just keep on learning. That’s the basic principle. Learn something today, and trust that you will learn more tomorrow. We’re basically spiritual children, anyway, and the Father wants his children to grow. We are blessed when we grow in spiritual wisdom.

In the New Testament, we have record of the apostles coming to a belated awareness. Sometimes the tree of faith takes a while to bear its fruit. No worry. As long as you are connected to the vine, you are nourished from the vine (John 15:4). Stay connected. Go in peace. Love one another.