

Triumph On A Donkey?

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Matthew 21:1-11

CHILDREN'S TIME

Look here at what I have. Yes, it is a bucket of rocks. Why do you think that I have a bucket of rocks? I thought we could have a rock concert. What do you think?

Don't you believe these rocks could sing? Do you think they could talk? What about tell stories about Jesus?

Well, you might be surprised to hear what Jesus said about that. One day Jesus was walking with his disciples toward Jerusalem. He asked two of his disciples to go into the next village where they would find a donkey and its baby. He asked them to bring him the animals, so the disciples did. They threw their robes over them so that Jesus could ride on the donkey into Jerusalem.

As he rode along, crowds of people were on both sides of the streets and they began praising Jesus and laying palm branches on the road in front of him and shouting, "Blessed

is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

They were making lots of noise and some of the religious leaders didn't like it. They asked Jesus to keep his followers quiet. Jesus told them, "If they keep quiet, the stones would start to praise God instead!"

If these rocks praised God this morning, I wonder what they might say? One might tell about a man named Abraham who left his land and everything familiar to him to go to a place that he didn't know because God asked him to.

This rock might tell how Solomon had used stones to build a big beautiful temple for people to worship God.

Another rock might tell about a friend of Jesus' named Peter, who even though he failed Jesus one time by saying he didn't even know him, God still built the early church using him. And Jesus even called Peter the rock on which the church would be built.

Yes, these stones might have a lot of stories to tell. Just as the followers of Jesus lined the streets to praise their king, you and I are

here today to praise Jesus. As long as we keep praising him, these rocks won't have to cry out.

SERMON

When you hear the word “triumph,” what comes to mind?

“Triumph” seems to be about winning or dominating. The winners are the ones who triumph over the losers — who are defeated.

Triumph brings to mind thoughts of military strength and a country at war. It is heralded by war trumpets, banners and flags proclaiming the nation's greatness. Warriors ride chariots or gilded war horses, armies of men with swords and shields are decked out in shining armor.

If it is our “triumph” we often puff out our chests to declare our greatness in comparison to those with whom we have been at war, as well as those who would think about challenging our greatness in the future.

These images are strikingly similar to the world of sports competition. A team will have banners and flags that they parade around to cheers

from the “home” team fans. The team players, who we sometimes call warriors, will run out onto the field or court to display their power. During special games, like the Super Bowl, there will even be fighter jets that cross the sky before the game as a demonstration of military power and national pride.

And we gauge a team's greatness by their triumph over other teams who have triumphed over other good teams — because the goal is to triumph over all other teams and be the best.

Right now we are in the thick of the NCAA Division 1 basketball tournament. We are in the middle of the Elite Eight round. Last night Michigan won their 13th game in a row and are headed to the Final Four next weekend. For the next week, all eyes will be fixed on the four teams who desire to be #1.

Then on Monday, April 2 the team who triumphs over all of the others will be crowned as national champions. There will be lots of cheering and gloating, as well as parades and invitations to visit important political leaders.

In professional football it is the Super Bowl. In baseball it is the World Series. In hockey it is the

Stanley Cup Finals. In tennis and golf it is the person who has won the most grand slam titles.

In all of these sports and others, it is the individual or team who has triumphed over the best of the best who claims the crown of the greatest.

However, Jesus comes triumphant in a very different way.

In contrast to a warrior cry and declaration of triumphant domination, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey with a young foal by its side. This actually reflects a kingly symbol dating back at least to King Solomon, King David's son, who, according to 1 Kings, rode into the city on a donkey before being anointed king of Israel.

This also fulfilled the prophet Zechariah who wrote about a future king who would come in humility riding on a donkey and its young foal.

In the story, common people acknowledged Jesus as king by spreading palm branches and their cloaks on his path just like people did to honor the king in 2 Kings 9.

There are too many parallel stories from kings of old to question that the people looked to Jesus as their next king. But what did that really mean to them.

The people are excited and jubilant. They are celebrating that Jesus has come and is bringing peace. They desperately want a new king — one of goodness, one who understands the common people's plight. They want relief from oppression. They want healing for their sick. They want freedom for those who have been imprisoned unjustly.

They have waited long enough. They want salvation now! And here comes their redeemer, Jesus, their new king, riding on a donkey. Hearts are lifted! Anticipation soars! Today begins a new day! Lay down the palms! Shout Hosanna!

What the people do not yet realize is that Jesus will offer them something different than they expect — a totally unexpected but better gift than they could have imagined.

They longed for a messiah king, but Jesus would be enthroned on a Roman cross to demonstrate power over even the worst that the

strongest kingdom on earth could dole out.

They wanted to be rescued from the evil Roman occupation, but Jesus was going to rescue them from the full depths of evil.

They wanted freedom from exploitative laws, but Jesus was going to free them from the laws of sin and death.

Hosannas are appropriate when Jesus enters Jerusalem, but not exactly for the reason the people are shouting them.

The bad news is that the crowd will be disappointed. The good news is that their disappointment is because they only saw the surface.

What they actually receive is much more wonderful, much deeper, much greater, more glorious than they could have imagined. Salvation and freedom was truly dawning for all people!

Let's go back and picture the scene. Pilate with his Roman legion of military ranks come into Jerusalem from the west with armor glinting in the sun, and razor sharp swords in hand, mounted on powerful war horses, and in chariots rambling through the

streets to intimidate anyone who might be involved in an uprising.

At the same time, coming from the east, in the clearest contrast you might imagine, is Jesus, not on a war horse, but unarmed on a donkey with it's young foal by its side.

He comes not to intimidate and wield power, but to unmask the powers that be — to overcome with mercy and love.

What a contrast of scenes!

Most of the time we pass over the fact that there were two donkeys involved in this scene with Jesus. There is the donkey Jesus was riding on, and then the young foal of the donkey that would have been walking alongside its mother.

The young foal is a powerful symbol, first of wildness. This foal has never been ridden. It is untamed and unpredictable — like Jesus, whose words were virtually incomprehensible to all who heard him.

The foal also represents new birth, innocence, and peace — all markers of Jesus' kingdom. They are entering the dawning of a brand new day for God's people, which

would be amazingly wonderful, as well as treacherously difficult.

Jesus was bringing a different kind of peace — not a peace that comes by conquest and war through weapons of violence, but peace that is established through a new way to be community — a new way to be human.

Remember that it was shortly after entering Jerusalem that Peter drew his sword demonstrating his commitment to fight for Jesus to be king, an honorable thing in any kingdom of the world in Jesus' day.

Even after many times telling his disciples that he was establishing a different kind of kingdom, not founded on violence and war, Peter and the others couldn't quite grasp what Jesus was talking about or what that might look like.

Jesus told Peter to put away his sword because that is not the way of his kingdom.

Are we willing to put away our swords and tools of violence?

Jesus' closest friends didn't get it. Neither did Jerusalem.

How easy it is for us to say that we embrace Jesus as our king in a

way that Jerusalem and the disciples failed to.

However, it is not so easy for us to do that. Although many of us have heard the stories of Jesus our whole lives, we might consider that we don't fully get what Jesus was about either. There might be more for us to learn.

We can be humbled by what might have been the superficial hosannas of a people who longed for relief, because they call us to question if our hosanna's are also shallow.

What kind of Jesus are we welcoming?

Perhaps it can ring in our ears what Jesus said earlier in Matthew's gospel, that ...

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. - Matthew 7:21

What triumphs in Jesus' Kingdom, that we celebrate today on Palm Sunday, are God's humble people who resist the violence of their culture, and are courageous enough to lay down their weapons and for the sake of the world, join Jesus riding humbly on a donkey.