

FIRST LESSON: Zechariah 9:9
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 21:1-11
April 5, 2020
PALM SUNDAY

“God Sent Who We Needed, Not Who We Wanted”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The gospel of Matthew tells a simple but mysterious story. The disciples are sent by Jesus into a village to get a donkey and her colt. We're used to picturing one animal, but in this account we are told there were two. It was quite normal for colts to stay with their mothers until they were nearly fully grown and for them to refuse to go anywhere without them. If asked what they were doing as they helped themselves to the animals they were to say, "The Lord has need of it."

The disciples brought the donkey and her colt to Jesus. The prophecies they were enacting were well known. There are two scriptures blended together. The first scripture, "Say to the Daughter of Zion" is from Isaiah 62: 11. Just this one line would have brought to mind the rest of it, which is *say to the daughter of Zion, See your savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.* The second part is from Zechariah 9: 9 which we read today. *Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.* These scriptures had been interpreted as referring to the Messiah for centuries. Jesus was not the only one to ever enact this type of entrance. Others before and after him did so, once with catastrophic results.

As the group around Jesus grew closer to Jerusalem and the road became more crowded Jesus' followers began to shout, "Hosanna to the son of David!" Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Others recognized Jesus and joined in. This was not simple praise; it was a request for action. This was a cry to a king for deliverance.

More than two and a half million people crammed into Jerusalem for Passover and the authorities were always nervous and watchful. It was absolutely mobbed when Jesus entered the city. As he crossed through the city gates he drew the attention of more than his followers. The focus on Jesus suddenly heightened as some began to realize that a statement was being made. The city, we're told, was stirred. It was like seismic activity. A ripple spread through the crowd, and people asked those who came with Jesus, **"Who is this?"** Word would have traveled quickly to those in power.

For three years Jesus had been elusive about his identity, instructing people not to say who healed them, and, with the exception of one Samaritan

woman at a well, refusing to make any clear statements when asked if he was the Messiah. This time, however, his claim to be the Messiah was unambiguous. His action had to be responded to. The authorities were always alert to political threats and rebellion, and so they assumed that this was Jesus' goal. They assumed that he was going to call for an all-out violent overthrow of Rome. Their assumptions, of course, were wrong. Jesus came to be the king the people needed, not the one they wanted.

The world then and now has little respect for humility. Only power counts. It is wealth and military strength that brings deference. It takes the direst of circumstances for people to listen to informed wisdom. Without political power behind them our nation would still be ignoring the warnings of Dr. Birx and Dr. Fauci. Their words are true but they are not welcome. Dr. Fauci has even had to have increased security placed around him because of death threats, as if destroying the messenger would destroy the message. And even now when we are facing a life or death situation there are still people saying, *"What do they know?"*

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey colt would have been greeted with derision by the powerful. *"What does he know?"* would have been the response. *"Just who does he think he is? We're the ones in power here. This is OUR turf."* And every action they took from that point on sprang from the basic assumption that Jesus had the same goals and values they did. It was all about personal power. They believed that Jesus wanted to remove them from power and exalt himself. And to be fair, they were also political realists. They were well aware of the way Rome thought and the way Rome reacted. Instability of any kind would not be tolerated. Rome allowed its subject nations limited self-government *only* if their own pawns were in charge. Jesus would never be a pawn of anyone, let alone Rome. They assumed Jesus wanted political power which would result in chaos, and they were determined to cut him off at the knees. They could in no way conceive of God working through the shame and suffering of the cross.

There's the God we want, and the God we need. We want prosperity. We want ease. We want success. We want to be liked and honored. We certainly all want this pandemic to end! We don't want to lose all of our investments, face unemployment and be told to stay home. These are not unreasonable desires on our part. But America has been here before and learned the painful lessons of worshipping the god of greed. My grandfather went from living in a luxury apartment to sending his wife and infant daughter home to her family and standing in a bread line while looking for work when the Great Depression hit. Jesse Livermore, who with the name Livermore was very likely a distant relative of mine on my mother's side, was one of the men behind the crash. He earned the names the "Wolf of Wall Street" and the "Great Bear of Wall Street" because while others lost their shirts he netted 10 million dollars. But Livermore made and lost four multi-million-dollar fortunes. His personal life was a disaster. He married three times. His last wife had been married four times before marrying Livermore, and two of her previous husbands had committed suicide. In 1940, when Livermore was unsuccessful in regaining his enormous wealth for the 5th time because of new stock market regulations and the start of World War II in

Europe he shot himself. He left a suicide note for his wife that read in part, “My dear Nina: Can't help it. Things have been bad with me. I am tired of fighting. Can't carry on any longer. This is the only way out. I am unworthy of your love. I am a failure.” When money is your only standard of success, there is nothing left when it goes.

If we put our trust for security in the powers of this world we will lose. What seems unshakable one day can completely crumble the next. The entire world economy is being brought low right now by something as tiny as a virus. No one is immune. The virus doesn't care about military might, fame or wealth. It doesn't matter who we are or what we own. But Jesus came to be a king who transcends this world. God is the one stable force in a world that is constantly changing. Human powers rise and fall, but our God endures forever.

The God we need rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He might not be the God we want, the god of easy answers. Unlike his followers he knew the suffering that lay ahead. He came anyway. He knows what we are going through and what is ahead. He is with us, anyway, and he is with us, **all the way**. As we pray for our health care workers on the front line and our scientists working furiously behind the scenes, and as we do our best to stay home and stay free of the virus, let us hold fast to God and not be deceived by what is temporary. When the stock market is booming, do not be fooled. When the stock market has crashed, do not give way to despair. The meaning of life is far deeper than these things, and the God we need has come into the world to show us the way. Amen.

Zechariah 9:9

9 Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Matthew 21:1-11

21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2** saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. **3** If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5 “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

11 The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”