

## Our Humble King

### Matthew 21:1-11

<sup>1</sup> When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying 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. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them. 'And he will send them immediately.'" <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> "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."

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The 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!"

<sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

<sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Delores Dufner, an American sacred music composer, has written a hymn that is appropriate for today:

O Christ, what can it mean for us to claim you as our king?  
 What royal face have you revealed whose praise the church would sing?  
 Aspiring not to glory's height, to power, wealth and fame,  
 You walked a diff'rent, lowly way, another's will your aim.

The hymn's opening question simmers at the heart of today's Palm Sunday text: just who is this Jesus, this humble king—this latter-day prophet from Nazareth in Galilee? **John Rollefson**

One thing we know is this king's entry into the city does not meet our expectation of pomp, ceremony, splendor, and the shock and awe of destructive power. In contrast, our king came with humility and gentleness, riding on a

donkey, reminding us that God's ways are not those of "this world." Kingship and lordship, indeed even messianic lordship, is here defined in terms of servanthood. Gentleness, humility, peaceable-ness, mercy, and self-giving acts of generosity and compassion are marks of God's domain. The triumphal march of Jesus into Jerusalem was that of a gentle and humble king. **James O. Duke**

On this Sixth Sunday in Lent the momentum of the season draws us closer to the cross. This is the celebration of Palm Sunday. Celebration and praise are the order of the day, inviting us to shout "Hosanna!" This Palm Sunday worship and celebration punctuates the moment with a call to communal faith, courageous proclamation, and conspicuous action as we consider again our shared identity as the church and community of faith.

The communal emphasis is unmistakable. It reveals the uncommon courage of common folk who have experienced a presence so powerful, a message so compelling, and a love so complete that they transgress the boundaries of religious and civil acceptability to make the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Many of them live in the villages and towns outside of Jerusalem. Others have traveled from as far away as Jericho, sorely needing the life-sustaining sustenance that Jesus so freely gave. His ministry has captured their imagination and nourished their souls as they have followed him to open-plain revivals where he explained the mysteries and the nearness of the kingdom, they had supped at banquets in the fields when he feed them with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, they had experienced his healing and compassionate touch, they had witnessed his miracles of casting out demons and making people whole, and they had listened for the gospel that he proclaimed what we are all loved and valued by God. This moment, however, is different. Jesus' voice gives way to that of the community, an unremarkable company of friends and strangers who announce with resolve that Jesus is the one for whom they have been waiting.

The sense of anticipation and excitement must be intense as they begin this journey, flanking Jesus on all sides with no apparent concern for the potential danger. Surely they are aware that the religious leaders consider him an enemy and the chief opponent to their survival, yet the marchers' declarations and proclamations intensifies as they approach the city gates. Their hosannas echo throughout the mountainous region, for Jesus has become the undeniable expression of God's presence in the world. So emphatic is their cry that Matthew likens them to oracles announcing Zechariah's divine warrior who would ride into the city gates, not on a stallion as a military leader, but on the back of a donkey and with peace and reconciliation for all nations in his mouth.

"Save us!" they cry out, creating a royal carpet of coats, cloaks, and tree branches for this proclaimer of good news. "Save us!" they shout, reminding us that the stain of division still permeates the fabric of our existence, thwarting our ability to live in peace and threatening our collective well-being. Almost instinctively, shouts of "Hosanna!" escape our lips, and we join this triumphal march, expanding our Lenten commitment to self-examination with reflection upon the quality of our lives together. For peace and reconciliation become possible when common folk with uncommon courage oppose the practices and policies that separate us, and together stand with "the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (v. 9).

History is filled with the stories of common folk who have recognized that we are able to accomplish more together than we can alone; stories that we reclaim, share and rehearse as we continue our Lenten journey. They include the women and men who provided safe passage on the Underground Railroad for persons seeking freedom from chattel slavery in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Remember also Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others in the Confessing Church in the 1930s, who took a definitive stance that their loyalty was to Jesus as Lord,

not to Hitler and the Nazis. Youths in South Africa stood against apartheid and formed the African National Congress Youth League in 1944 under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, envisioning a world in which racial domination would no longer exist.

Many others join these examples of uncommon courage, including the 250,000 women, men, and children from diverse racial, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds who gathered in the U.S. capital on August 28, 1963, anchored in an abiding faith in God's gift of justice and human dignity. Like those who walked the dusty road to Jerusalem with Jesus, many of them made the pilgrimage at great personal risk, yet they marched to condemn the systemically oppressive laws that divided the nation.

At the conclusion of his now-famous "I Have a Dream" speech, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. articulated his dream of a people united and a world in which justice would become the normative expression of human relationship. With him, the crowd and numerous others who watched from living rooms and gathering places throughout the nation refused to "wallow in the valley of despair" but, rather, dreamed in the face of insurmountable odds and stood as prophets of a new creation.

We remember the Freedom Rider, nonviolent protestors, civil rights workers who were courageous enough to fight for the rights of Black people, Immigrants, Farm Workers, Native Peoples. Those who fought for equal pay for equal work for women, those who continue to fight for those being human trafficked, bullied and are victims of domestic violence right under our noses. We remember these stories and others so that we may find the courage to march with Jesus, our humble king, and proclaim a word of peace and reconciliation, despite our location among the common folk. After all, Jesus' followers possessed no formal authority to change their world, but neighbor and friend, stranger and distant traveler, children

and adults marched into the city gates with Jesus to contest the exclusionary practices that had so long defined their existence. When asked "Who is this?" they replied, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee" (v. 11).

This disturbed the religious leaders, as verse 46 reveals. Perhaps the fervor of the moment forecast a time when common folk standing on the side of justice would become a recurrent theme in the world. Maybe they were concerned that people would begin to sense their own deep yearning for a just and life-affirming existence. Perhaps the image of Jesus as prophet invites us in this moment to embody peace and reconciliation as an ongoing practice and stand boldly. In this challenging time of uncertainty, fear of illness from COVID-19, concerns about employment and finances...maybe this is the time to put our eternal trust and hope in our gentle king, "the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (v. 9). **Veronica Miles**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.