

"Blessed Are The Rejected"  
Matthew 21:1-11  
April 2, 2023 Palm Sunday  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

It is hard to believe that Jesus is on his way to rejection, isn't it? And not just rejection but death. He enters the holy city of Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna!" which is a cry of adoration, praise, and joy. It literally means, "save us now!" Crowds of people lined the street as he rode on a donkey. They threw their coats and the branches of palm trees on the ground to make a "red carpet" for his procession. They were obviously excited to see him.

Jesus has spent the past three years teaching, healing, preaching, and upsetting all expectations of who he should be. He touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, healed the unhealable, and revealed the face of the God of mercy and compassion. He has spoken of the Holy Scriptures as though he wrote them himself- giving all who were willing to listen, a new and profound understanding of the age-old story of their people and their God.

His whole life pointed to this moment- the moment when he rides on a borrowed donkey and enters Jerusalem. Unknown to everyone but him, all heaven is about to break loose.

This is the beginning of an odd week- without question the most important week of the Christian faith. It begins with a donkey and a parade and ends with an arrest and an execution. If we are willing to walk with Jesus through each day of this week, our emotions will go from one extreme to another. Welcome to Holy Week, the week when we must find the courage to walk with Jesus from triumph to catastrophe.

The religious and political storm is brewing as Jesus rides into the city to the exuberant welcome of his followers. Everything about the procession was an attack against the cruel Empire of the Roman oppressors. David Lose explains: *"Jesus's triumphant entry wasn't a first century version of Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. (It wasn't meant to be entertainment.) It was meant as a statement.*

*Matthew is clear- Jesus rode into town as a returning king. Moreover, the crowds greeted him as such. The hosannas the people cry have both religious and political overtones. They greet him as the Lord's Messiah and expect him to overthrow the Romans. And the Romans take note. This helps to explain why, in fact, he was crucified. It wasn't just an accident. It wasn't because he simply offended the religious authorities. It was because he proclaimed another empire, another reign- the reign of God- and called people to give their allegiance to this empire first. He was, in other words, a threat.*

*The tragedy of the day is that the people are half right. He **did** come as God's Messiah. But they misunderstood what that meant- not 'regime change' by violence, but rather the love of God poured out upon the world in a way that dissolved all the things we use to differentiate ourselves from others and the formation of a single humanity that knows itself- and all those around them- as God's beloved people.*

*The other tragedy of the day is that the religious and political authorities are also half right. Jesus was a threat. For that matter, he still is. He threatens our penchant to define ourselves over and against others. He threatens the way in which we seek to establish our future by hoarding wealth and power. He threatens our habit of drawing lines and making rules about who is acceptable and who is not. He threatens all those things and more. But they are also wrong in thinking they can eliminate this threat by violence.*

*Jesus' resurrection- which in Matthew's Gospel is accompanied by the shaking of the very foundations of the earth- affirms that God's love is stronger than hate and God's love is stronger than death. And eventually, all will yield to the mercy and majesty of God." (1)*

No wonder Matthew writes, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil saying, 'Who is this?'" Earlier in his Gospel, Matthew told us the whole city of Jerusalem was in turmoil. This was at the beginning of the story after Jesus was born and the wise men stopped at Herod's palace to seek directions to the cradle of the newborn King of the Jews. At that time Matthew writes, "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod had a very good reason to be afraid. And when Herod was afraid everyone else was terrified!

So, Jesus enters the holy city. The city of his destiny. His parents brought him here to the Temple to be dedicated when he was just eight days old. His whole life has been leading to this moment, to this place. Jerusalem is both the sacred home of the Temple- the house of God- and the center of the opposition against the Son of God.

It is a place of profound contradictions- it was the home of the great kings of Jewish history and is the place that, as Jesus said, "kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." Jesus knew what he was walking into that day. Everything he did, he did for a reason. Riding the donkey hearkened back to the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah. You can be sure the words of the prophet were ringing in people's ears as they witnessed the spectacle.

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! 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."*

Those who were paying attention knew exactly what it meant. Jesus was arriving in Jerusalem as a triumphant king coming to claim his royal throne. For an oppressed and downtrodden people, it was a moment of sheer joy! Finally! After years of pain and suffering at the hands of the cruel Roman Emperor, they would finally be free. They couldn't wait to see King Jesus destroy their enemy!

But again, the donkey should have been their first clue that Jesus didn't come to town for a military victory- he came for a spiritual one. His arrival at the beginning of the great festival of Passover is the fulfillment of who he has been all along. Those who followed Jesus did so for many reasons- some had been healed by him; some had eaten that miraculous feast of loaves and fishes; some had heard him preach. They followed Jesus because he offered them something they never had before. He offered them hope and acceptance. No one was rejected. In their violent and unstable world, he offered another way of life- a life based on the grace and mercy of God.

What is the first thing he does after he gets off the donkey? Does he retreat to a quiet place with his disciples? Does he go to worship? No, he raises a ruckus in the holiest place on earth- the temple. Thomas Long reminds us that Jesus was not a reformer, he was a revolutionary. He is not improving the temple, he is attacking it, and it is doomed.

*"In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus demolishes the religious structures of his day, not in order to create havoc and strew the landscape with wreckage, but in order to accomplish the deep sense of the will of God, to allow God's true intent for the world to emerge. We have already seen in his teaching and healing that Jesus fulfilled the law of God by tearing down the established view of the law and building up something new. He does the same with the whole temple system. In order to fulfill God's will, Jesus overturns the old edifice and erects something new. He is building a new temple out of his words and deeds. We see here the contrast between what the temple was supposed to represent and what the temple had become.*

*For the Old Testament prophets, the temple was intended to be a means for people to drawn near to God, not an end in itself. Indeed, the temple was the symbol of the deepest truths about Israel, that the distinctive character of the Jewish people was their intimate and abiding relationship with God.*

*In other words, Israel was defined by prayer, by its access and communion with God, and the temple was to be a 'house of prayer,' a place that symbolized and enacted this union between God and the Jewish people. But in actual operation, the temple was a 'den of robbers.' A robbers' den is not the place where thievery is committed; it is the hiding place where thieves go to be safe after committing their crimes." (2)*

Jesus accused the religious officials of running, not a house of prayer, but a self-serving house of privilege, where only a few were welcome. It is a sign of the sickness of the old regime that what angers the chief priests and the scribes about Jesus's temple assault is the sight of people being healed and the sound of children singing hosannas.

When the citizens of Jerusalem asked, "Who is this?" His followers answered without pause. "This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee." Even that description sets Jesus apart from the power brokers of the temple and the palace. The Messiah does not come from the holy city or from a rich and powerful family. He comes from the forgotten, rejected, isolated village of Nazareth. He comes from a place of poverty and uncertainty. For most of the people, he wasn't who they thought he would be. But he was who they needed.

And he is who we need too. For we also live in a time of empire where war and violence reign and might makes right. We live in a time when those with power and money will do whatever it takes to maintain their own status and fill their bank accounts while our children and their teachers face high-powered weapons in their classrooms. We live in a time of deep divisions, misinformation, mistrust. It is a dangerous time- but remember this- it is nothing Jesus hasn't seen before.

As we enter this Holy Week, we will witness both joy and sorrow by his side. On Thursday we will sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples at their last supper. Friday night we will stand at the foot of the cross and we will weep with despair as he dies.

But don't let the donkey fool you. Jesus is humble but he is not harmless. Just as he entered the holy city and proceeded to turn the temple upside down, so he enters our world and does the same. He comes to our places of worship and demands faith with integrity. He stalks the halls of power and demands freedom for captives and food for the hungry. He does not salute the flag of any nation nor bow down to any president or king. He calls us to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves; to speak for those who have no voices. He calls us to welcome the rejected and empower the powerless.

Just as Jesus entered into the confusion and chaos of those days in Jerusalem, so he enters into ours. He continues to threaten our reliance on anything that is not from God. He threatens our wealth, our status, our political identity, our religion, and even our good works and our relationships- if they stand in the way of our full devotion to God. Jesus' journey to the cross demonstrates just how far he was willing to go to show us who he is and who we are called to be.

It is true that we live in unique and difficult times- when haven't we? But we also live in the life-changing presence of Jesus Christ. Transformation is a gift to us from the God who created us, welcomes us, and loves us as though we are the only one to love.

Let us walk together, with Jesus, through this Holy Week. May we have the courage to accept his gifts of transformation and new life. May we find our voice so that we too may stand up and cry out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God!"

Amen.

End Notes:

- "...in the meantime," April 5, 2017, David Lose.
- MATTHEW, Thomas Long, Westminster John Knox. 1997. Pp. 236-237.

### PASTORAL PRAYER

We gather in this place of worship to mark the beginning of Holy Week, Gracious God. Doesn't calling it "Holy Week" set us up for failure? We are anything but holy- at least in our own eyes. But in your eyes- in your eyes we shimmer with holiness, we positively glow with your image imprinted within each one of us.

No matter who we are or what we do, at the most basic level we are yours. You claim us even when we can't claim ourselves. You name us, even when we forget who we are. You love us even when we are at our most unlovable. And we are amazed.

As we stand on the cusp of Holy Week- pour down your holiness upon us so that we may walk with Jesus. Open our hearts to receive your great love and give us the courage to take this journey the whole way to the cross—and beyond. Because we know, that with you, there is always a "beyond."

Allow us to pause in these coming days, to reflect upon the story we have heard of Jesus. Allow us to pause and reflect upon our place in his story. Allow us to pause and invite others to participate in that story too.

Holy God, in this Holy Week we seek to be holy too.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.