

“A Royal Rumble?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
April 2, 2023 - Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday

[Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11](#)

Last year on Palm Sunday, we read from the gospel of Luke an account of the scene of Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey that involved people spreading their cloaks on the ground before him, with no mention of the waving or laying down of palms or other leafy branches, and I suggested that, accordingly, we might rename the day Cloak Sunday. This year, the story of Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem comes to us from the perspective of the gospel of Matthew, which offers us a similar, but different account. Matthew, like Luke, is a gospel based in large part on the earlier account of the gospel of Mark, and Matthew follows Mark’s account of people placing tree branches along with cloaks upon the road before Jesus (it should be noted that the tradition of these branches being from palm trees appears only in the gospel of John), so perhaps we could call today Tree Branch Sunday...or not (it’s not a very catchy name).

Perhaps if we were to give the day a snazzy name in keeping with one of the unique features of the lesson from Matthew, we could call today Double Donkey Day, for Matthew’s account is the only of our four gospels that depicts Jesus riding into town not on one animal, but upon two, a donkey and her colt. I’m not sure how he managed to sit astride the two friendly beasts as he came into town, but he was a worker of miracles, who made possible impossible things like raising a person from the dead, as we learned in last Sunday’s lesson, so I’m sure he was able to figure out this much less difficult logistical challenge.

Matthew makes it a double donkey day by using a poetic passage from the Hebrew scriptures, from the prophet Zechariah, which employed a common feature of Hebrew poetry in having two lines with them being connected, not by rhyming last words, as is so common in the poetry of the English language, but by having two lines that repeat the same idea but using different words. But the two lines of poetry of Zechariah, envisioning Israel’s king humbly riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey, was taken more literally by the writer of Matthew, who understood the two lines of poetry to be describing two different animals. One of Matthew’s chief concerns, throughout his gospel, written to inspire faith in Jewish

followers of Jesus, was to demonstrate that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who literally fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew prophets, and so by making it a double donkey day, Matthew is demonstrating that Jesus really, uniquely, and unmistakably is the long-awaited one who literally fulfills the ancient scriptures.

The people of Jesus' day longed for the fulfilling of their scriptures, which provided hope, initially to a broken, conquered, and hopeless people living in exile under the yoke of the violent and oppressive rule of Babylon, promising that a ruler would come to them, who like King David, would establish a new realm where they would worship their God in peace and enjoy justice and prosperity. The people longed for this realm in the days of Babylon's rule, and they continued to long for the coming of this realm during Jesus' day, a time when Rome ruled ruthlessly over them through their installed kings, the Herods, and their governors such as Pilate, who reigned through unleashing terrible violence and injustice.

Certainly King Herod Antipas traveled from where he ruled in Galilee and the land east of the Jordan River into Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, not riding on a donkey, a symbol of humility and peace, for there was nothing humble or peaceful about Herod. And Roman Governor Pilate would have ridden into town as well, with his troops in tow, perhaps atop a great war horse or on a Roman chariot. I wonder if the processions of Pilate or Herod ran into the branch and cloak strewn path of rival ruler Jesus. If they did, I doubt there would have been much of a rumble in the style of the *Anchorman* movies, which depicted TV news crews facing off against one another and fighting in epic street brawls, or the dancing duels of rival gangs in *West Side Story*. More likely, Jesus, peaceful and humble, riding on his donkey (or donkeys), would have gotten out of the way of the mighty tyrants and warriors. There would have been no royal rumble, for Jesus did not come into town to begin a violent insurrection or to replace the old tyrants with a new tyranny. No, Jesus came into town, peaceful and humble, to establish a realm of peace and justice, a realm that was greater than that of any one king or governor or empire. Christ came to reign over all the nations and their leaders, to lead us all in paths that lead to peace and goodness, if we will but submit ourselves to that reign.

And so we do. We don't lay down branches or cloaks or palm fronds, but our very hearts and minds. We give our whole selves in the service of the one who brings true peace, and so we follow our leader, Jesus the Christ in working for the growth of peace and goodness for all. Because we follow this Son of David, this Prince of Peace, we engage in his work that leads to the creation of a more just and peaceful world for all.

This Palm Sunday, as we continue the festal procession and sing and shout our own "Hosanna!", let us go ourselves through the wide open gates of righteousness that lead us to peace, and let us lead others to them as well. May Christ reign in our hearts and throughout the world, this day and throughout time. Amen.