

TWO SIDES OF THE STORY

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Matthew 21:1-11

Passover begins tomorrow at sunset. Passover is a Jewish festival that lasts for eight days. As Christians, we do not celebrate Passover, but we do recognize that Jesus' Last Supper was the Passover meal. Jesus was in Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate this ancient festival which commemorates the Israelites fleeing slavery in Egypt, about 1300 BC.

In Hebrew, Passover is known as *Pesach* which means 'to passover.'

You will recall from scripture that the patriarch Joseph was sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt where he rose to become the chief administrator to the pharaoh. Eventually, he brought his brothers and family to Egypt to live. They flourished there for many generations until, as we read in the beginning of the book of Exodus, *a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph*. As an immigrant population, the Israelites in Egypt were forced into hard labor building cities for the king. By this time the people had mostly forgotten their relationship with God but God remembered them and heard their cries and called Moses to help lead them to freedom. The king would not allow the Israelites to leave so God sent plagues upon the Egyptians concluding with the plague of death. God would send the angel of death to kill the first-born sons of the Egyptians. The Israelites were instructed to mark their homes with lamb's blood and the angel would "pass over" them. The Israelites fled Egypt that very night.

In New Testament times, Passover was a major celebration. It was one of the three pilgrimage festivals when Jews the world over converged on Jerusalem.

As we read today, it is almost Passover and the pilgrims are clogging the roads leading to Jerusalem. For some, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Some had traveled from distant lands to be in the holy capital of Israel. Passover was a time of hope. Just as God had brought deliverance from the Egyptians, maybe God will bring deliverance to Israel from the current Roman occupation.

The festive spirit of the crowd increases the closer they get to Jerusalem. Packets of singing erupts through the crowd. Many sing the words of Psalm 118 which itself is a litany of thanksgiving for pilgrims approaching the temple.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

You can imagine there might be a call-and-response as one group would sing “Let Israel say,” and another group would answer, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

As they near the city they shout from the psalm, *This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.* And then there is the verse which Matthew quotes: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.* The people are coming to a festival, a celebration, a party. It is the gathering of the faithful.

As this river of people converges outside Jerusalem, they notice that there is a man in the crowd who is riding a donkey. At the sight of this man the crowd erupts and cheers. They recognize him. Okay, they may not know who is on the donkey, or even know his name, but they recognize the symbolism. Imagine that you are at a Fourth of July picnic and a man dressed up as George Washington walks through the crowd. You might cheer and wave or even salute. This man is clearly not President Washington, but you understand what he represents.

The pilgrims get it. Matthew merges two Old Testament passages into one verse when he explains what is going through the minds of these people. Matthew writes, *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.* The crowd would be familiar with the passage from Isaiah (62:11) which reads, *Say to daughter Zion, “See, your salvation comes...”* and the passage from Zechariah which reads, *Rejoice greatly, O daughter 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.* The people understand the symbolism.

The people respond by becoming part of this moving tableau. They treat this man like he is a king returning triumphantly from war. In adulation they spread their cloaks on the ground. They cut branches and limbs from the trees and spread them over the road. They create their own red carpet. Around Jesus the people all shout the words again from Psalm 118, saying, *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

The people know this is not a real king who will drive the Romans out of their land. He’s just a guy in a costume. But in the spirit of the day, they are more than willing to participate, to pretend, to hope.

What a magnificent day that must have been—the crowds, the singing, the joy of a shared faith, the anticipation of the week in Jerusalem. This was the purpose of their pilgrimage. It is also, as we know, only one side to this story. There is another side—the side in which the man on the donkey is not playing a king, but is a king.

Jesus and his disciples are themselves heading to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Outside the city, at Bethphage, Jesus sends two of his disciples into the village with very specific instructions to secure a donkey. (On a side note, there was only one animal—not two as Matthew describes. Jesus did not straddle two animals riding down the road into Jerusalem. That would be silly.) The disciples do as they have been instructed. They acquire the animal and Jesus rides it towards Jerusalem. This is a very intentional fulfillment of the words of Zechariah, *look your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.*

As he rides toward Jerusalem, accompanied by his disciples, the crowd sees him and cheers and lays the cut branches on the ground and shouts Hosanna.

To the crowd, the man on the donkey is just play-acting, part of the pageantry of the day. But we know that he is the son of David, the Messiah of God. He is the fulfillment of scripture. He comes in the name of the Lord and offers salvation, not from the Romans, but from something more substantial. Jesus offers a right relation with God, a new way of living with God, salvation from sin and even death itself.

Today is Palm Sunday. We began with our procession of palms waving and singing Hosanna. It is wonderful, it is exciting, it is a reminder that our savior is a king to be worshipped and adored. But we also know the other side of the story, the story that continues on into the city, the story in which Jesus is betrayed and arrested and tried and executed. We enter this place in palms and in recognition of the week that is before us we shall depart in darkness.

Although the parade into Jerusalem took place centuries ago, I would argue that it continues today. Not just that we re-enact this scene each year, but that we, as a church, should live Palm Sunday every day.

On the one hand, our faith contains a lot of pageantry. We construct beautiful churches and cathedrals and fill them with organs and choirs. We hold great festivals and holy days. We are like a parade calling attention to ourselves. And that is not a bad thing. Jesus did the same as did the prophets before him.

On the other hand, we must use this pomp to point the world towards the Christ and a way of life in which the old is sacrificed so that all might know a new life with God.

When you leave this place today, through the week I ask that you reflect on Holy Week—the circumstances which Jesus himself put into motion so that he might deliver himself as the sacrifice for the world. There, on the cross, he paid the price for our sins so that we might know a new life with God. On the one hand, our story is a parade; on the other, it is a miracle. Thanks be to God.