

SOMETHING TO GET STIRRED UP ABOUT

I want to begin this morning with a thought experiment, and I want to invite you to join me. Imagine that you are present at the first Palm Sunday. You are traveling alongside Jesus and his disciples as they are entering Jerusalem. First, you arrive at the Mount of Olives. Jesus sends two of his disciples ahead, telling them they will find a “donkey and a colt”.

If you read the scripture, you notice that scripture breaks away from the action to quote another scripture. We are told that this was to fulfill what was spoken through the Prophets:

“Say to the daughter of Zion, behold your King is coming to you,
gentle and mounted on a donkey also upon a colt the son of a
draught animal.”

So, the disciples did as Jesus commanded them. They went to retrieve the “colt and donkey” and brought it back. Now, here’s a cultural note. The prophecy is a little weird, because a donkey is not a fitting mount for a King. A donkey is a humble animal. It just isn’t dignified for a king to ride a donkey.

The proper mount for a King is a horse. The horse is a war animal. Surely the person anointed to restore the throne of David would enter Jerusalem riding a horse- preferably leading a liberating army as well. Jesus enters riding a donkey with an entourage of twelve.

It’s an important detail because we need to understand that Jesus is a different kind of King. He’s a King who lifts up the lowly, and for a King who lifts up the lowly, a donkey sends just the right message. The scripture goes on to tell us that a crowd precedes Jesus as he approaches Jerusalem. The scripture says that most of the crowd spread out their garments on the road and that others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. This is the ancient Jewish version of the “red carpet treatment”. The idea is that feet of the animal carrying the King will not touch the ground.

This is their way of honoring their King. The people were going before him and behind him shouting out, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Now, I want to pause once more to give you some more insight on the historical context. If you were to go to any major city in the US today, you would often find that the downtown area was the most depressed area of the community. Urban centers tend to be zones of crime and poverty in our society. Middle- and Upper-Class citizens have- for the most part- moved to the suburbs. Now, that trend is reversing some, but that’s been the way it has been for most of our lives.

In the ancient world the opposite was true. City centers tended to be dominated by the wealthy. The outer fringes are poorer. The worst place was outside the wall. This area of town

tends to be populated with displaced persons- lepers, prostitutes, beggars, bandits, and so forth. These people are outside the walls because the “decent folk” who live in that town want them locked out; they want them locked away, so that they can protect themselves from crime. Outlying villages that help service the towns are dangerous places to live. They are often subject to raids by bandits, and they have what we would call a high crime rate. Remember, there’s no real law enforcement in that day. So, it’s at least potentially significant that this episode is playing itself out outside the walls.

We should also note that this episode is occurring during the time of Passover. The passage that we just read says that the people left the feast, which is in the middle of the city by the Temple. They left the feast and ran out to greet Jesus. This means the population will have temporarily grown, because pilgrims will have arrived in Jerusalem to make sacrifice. So, this is a bigger than normal crowd that is out there.

Now, I don’t know for sure, but the picture I get is that the crowd is composed of people of all types from all over the place. Again, these people are stirred up. They are excited Jesus is coming. They are shouting “Hosanna!” throwing palms in the road and their garments in the road. They make such a ruckus, that by the time Jesus enters the city, people within the city are saying, “Who is this?” The crowd responds, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Now, as strange as this story is, this answer makes the story even stranger. Even today there are certain places you can go to find certain kinds of people. If you’re looking for a scholar, for example, you might begin by looking for a professor at an Ivy League institution. If you’re looking for a computer genius, you might try Silicon Valley. If you’re looking for a top-notch investment banker, try Wall Street in New York. If you’re looking for an engineer, just a short drive to Huntsville. You’ll find scads of them! In Ancient Palestine, Galilee was not the place you would expect to find a prophet. The prophets would be in Judea, close to Jerusalem, or out in the wilderness close to the Dead Sea, but not in Galilee.

So, this story is filled with contradictions and paradoxes. We have a king who rides on a donkey and far from being born into a wealthy family, he was born into what we would call a working-class family. We have a king who enters town with a procession of lower-class and working-class people, while the affluent denizens of the town stand and watch, asking, “Who is this guy?” A man who is a prophet from Galilee of all places.

Well, let me explain it to you. He is a king. However, he is a different kind of king. He’s a king who doesn’t stand on ritual. He isn’t that interested in pomp and circumstance. He is a King who values righteousness over ritual. The people who are greeting him know that he cares about them, and when they learn he is coming they are stirred up.

Now, I keep saying that they are stirred up. The word that the New Testament writers use when they talk about this passage is “σείω” (pronounced say-oh), which literally means “to

shake.” This word is the root word of the modern English word seismic, which, as you know, refers to earthquakes. These folks are stirred up! They are shaking the very ground with their outcries.

You’ve heard this story many times, I’m sure. It’s a familiar story- we tell it once a year. But I think it’s important for us to hear this story again, because I think it’s important for us to think about how we greet Jesus when Jesus comes into our lives. Let’s step back into the modern world for just a moment. As Christians we make the same statement that the gospel writers make. We make the statement that Jesus is our King. Jesus is Lord. We stand by that. However, as we look at what is happening in this story, we see people stopping their everyday lives, going out to greet the King. So, let me ask a question- and this is the 800- pound gorilla in the room. How much attention do we pay to our King?

Barbara’s best friend is a woman named Connie. Connie has a daughter named Jennifer. Jennifer is her 30’s now, but when she was a teenager, she vowed to spend 10 minutes a day talking to God. I’m a math major, so I did the math. If you add that up, it comes to five hours per month for a thirty-day month. That doesn’t even count her being in church. When I heard that I was amazed, because I thought to myself, “I wonder how many adults spend five hours per month- outside church- with their God? I bet the number is smaller than some of us think. I thought to myself, do I spend five hours per month- outside the church- with my God? And I’m a preacher.

Going back to the story, you see that the people of Jerusalem are stirred up when Jesus arrives. They are excited that he is coming. If you read the story, you can almost sense that excitement. It feels as if everything is about to change. These people are not acting like Presbyterians. There’s not a one of them that’s frozen! Not one! These people are stirred up! Now, imagine that Jesus is coming here- to our town, to our church. Are we stirred up about that? Are we excited about that? Or do we just shrug our shoulders and continue with business as usual? Do we say, well it’s fine for him to come here as long as he doesn’t create too much of a ruckus. Even worse, do we ask the question, “Who is this?” If he’s creating that much of a ruckus, he must not be the God I know.

You’re all people of faith. I know all of you. I don’t have to remind you of the significance of this event, but I’m going to do so because that’s my job. This story marks the beginning of the last week of Jesus’ life. From here he will hold the last supper, he will be arrested, tried, and convicted, and he will ultimately be crucified for your sins and for mine. The third day he will be resurrected. As Christians we believe that resurrection brings us a new life- an eternal life.

Now, I don’t expect Jesus to walk down the aisle this morning, though he could, but there are at least two senses in which we can say Jesus is coming to us. The first sense- and, perhaps, the most obvious sense- is the apocalyptic sense. Those of us who follow Jesus expect the end times to be heralded by the return of our Lord. I’m not going into that because that’s something that people far above my pay grade have struggled to explain for centuries.

The second sense interests me more here. While the incarnate Jesus doesn't enter our town, riding on a donkey, Christ comes to us in the Holy Spirit throughout our lives. Each of us has had, and continues to have, and will continue to have opportunities to greet the risen savior throughout our lives. Multiple opportunities! The question I have for you is, "Are you stirred up about that?" Are you excited about that? Excited enough that you're prepared to shout Hosanna!? Excited enough that you're prepared to make the ground shake with your excitement?

I am. I'm stirred up about this Jesus thing. I'm excited to see what Jesus has in store for us next. Are you? I'm stirred up! Are you?