

## **Mile 23: Triumphal?**

March 28, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Matthew 21:1-17**

So today, on this Palm Sunday, we are finishing up our Lenten sermon series titled “Miles 18-23,” where we have been looking at some of the most challenging passages in the second half of Matthew’s gospel – exploring what the kingdom of God is all about. We called this series “Miles 18-23,” because for those who like to run marathons, it is said that that stretch is hands-down the hardest part of the race to get through – it is that stretch when the runner is tired, beaten down, worn out – much like we were at the start of Lent, after a full year of pandemic fatigue – and yet the marathon continues and there is still 6 or 7 or 8 miles left to go.

As Jesus draws closer and closer to the cross – as he makes his way toward Jerusalem, his words and his stories and his actions get heavier and heavier; weightier and weightier. He moves from joyful healing stories and feeding multitudes and calming the raging storms, to issuing warnings about not being ready when the bridegroom arrives, what happens when we refuse to forgive after having been forgiven; what happens when we respond to God’s invitation yet refuse to allow ourselves to be changed. And I’ve spent a lot of time over the last several weeks saying, “Jesus, you just had to go there, didn’t you? You could’ve ended the story 2/3 of the way through, and wrapped it up with a neat little happy bow, but you just *had* to go and throw a curveball in there and make a fun story really hard. And not nearly so feel-good.

So today, as we finish up this series, we are entering into what has long been one of my favorite stories in scripture. And when I say a long time, I mean, since I was a kid. Palm Sunday is just...great. It’s like, coming to church and having a party. Waving palm branches, shouting Hosanna, hearing the story of Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem and everyone throwing him a parade...

Plus, I grew up with a little sister. And if I could have an excuse to whack her over the head with a palm branch, I was going to take that opportunity every time. It’s just, a really, really fun story. It feels kinda like when a runner has been running a race and starts to get close to the end, there are tons and tons of people all lined up along the streets and the sidewalks with noisemakers and bright colors, all cheering on the runners through the last long leg. “You’re doing great!” “Keep it up!” “You’re almost there!” “Lookin’ strong!” And even if you know that you are not, in fact, looking strong, the cheers and the encouragement and the excitement can be enough to give that last good burst of energy to push you through the finish line.

“Hosanna!” the crowd shouted, as they waved their branches and rattled their plastic clappers and sounded their air horns and cheered. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” “You’re doing great, Jesus! You’re looking strong! Keep it up!”

So let’s back up just a little bit, because this story is fun and exciting, and it is easy to get distracted by the crowds and the cheers and the excitement. But underneath the party and the parade there is some really interesting and deeper stuff happening, at least here in Matthew’s telling of the story.

So when I close my eyes and picture this scene, what usually jumps into my mind is this: Jesus is sitting on a donkey – and a big one. A strong one. A donkey who thinks he is bigger than he is. Maybe a donkey who thinks he’s a horse, holding his head up high. Jesus is surrounded by a small group of people – probably his disciples. And as he rides into Jerusalem, the streets of Jerusalem are lined with people, all waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna.” In my mind, word has gotten around that Jesus is coming, and the whole city of Jerusalem throws a welcome party for him – welcoming Jesus and the disciples to their city. Welcoming the one who they thought would overthrow Rome and reestablish Israel’s independence forever.

But in Matthew, that’s actually not how the story goes. Like, at all.

First off, the crowds of people are *not* people from Jerusalem. These crowds are the ones who just can’t get enough of Jesus, and so they are following him around wherever he goes. Backing up several verses into chapter 20, we see that as Jesus is leaving the town of Jericho – which is about 18 miles, or roughly a 2-day journey from Jerusalem, there is a large crowd of people with him. The disciples are *part* of that crowd, but they are only a small part. And on their way out of town there were two blind men who were calling out to Jesus to heal them. The crowd shushed the blind men, but the blind men yelled all the louder and Jesus healed them and these two men immediately jumped right up and joined the crowd. We can only assume that this has been going on for some time – Jesus will heal somebody, or blow somebody’s mind with a deep teaching or a witty comeback, and that person will want to stick around to see what happens next. And over the course of time, this crowd of people that Jesus has had an impact on has gotten pretty big.

So Jesus and this big crowd of people is making their way toward Jerusalem, and on the way they make a stop in Bethphage, a little mountain town on the east slope of the Mount of Olives – the mountain – or really, more of a really big hill – that overlooks the city of Jerusalem.

In Bethphage, Jesus sends two of his disciples to fetch – to borrow – not just a donkey, but a donkey and her colt. And when they come back, they lay blankets on the donkey *and the colt*, and Jesus “sits on *them*.”

So, setting aside the question of how in the world Jesus is riding two donkeys that are different heights *at once* – that had to have been awkward and it had to have looked even more awkward – Jesus and the donkey and the colt and this massive crowd of people all make their way down the Mount of Olives, into the Kidron Valley, and into the city of Jerusalem. And as they enter the city, the crowds of people who have been travelling with Jesus lay their cloaks down on the road, and cut branches from the trees and lay them down before Jesus (it doesn't actually say anything about palm branches here, but they could've been palm leaves). And they begin to shout loudly, yelling "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Now, imagine being a Jerusalem local, going about your day-to-day life, and all of a sudden one day a massive crowd of tourists storms through the gates of the city, rolling out the proverbial red carpet, announcing the entrance of a "king," and what rides into town is not a wealthy warrior on horseback but a poor man in his 30s, trying his best to straddle two donkeys at the same time.

The Jerusalem locals were not lining the streets and waving palm branches and shouting hosanna and giving Jesus a warm Jerusalem welcome. On the contrary, we are told that "the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'who is this?'"

This is one of those cases when I don't think our English translations do justice to what was really being communicated in the Greek. Depending on your translation, this verse might read "the city was in turmoil," or maybe "the city was in an uproar," or it was "stirred up," or "the city was excited," or even "the whole city was moved."

But the word here comes from the Greek word "*seio*," meaning "to shake." The city was shaken. But we're not talking about them being a little rattled, or a little unsettled, or a little bit uncomfortable. Matthew only uses this word in two other places. First, in Matthew 27, after Jesus is crucified. We read "*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook (*seio*), and the rocks were split.*" So a shaking, a rattling, as strong as an earthquake, so strong that it can break rocks in two.

The other place this word is used is in chapter 28, the story of the resurrection. "*And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook (*seio*) and became like dead men.*" The Bible obviously doesn't deal at all in modern medicine, but when I read this scene, it's almost like Matthew is describing a seizure. The guards are so terrified by the presence of the angel and the monstrous earthquake that their brains start to misfire, causing a seizure. They shake, violently, and then look to be dead.

So when Jesus enters Jerusalem, with his crowds of followers surrounding him, heralding him as king, the city of Jerusalem is shaken, like an earthquake. Shaken, like a seizure. Rattled to its core, so hard that things are broken loose. Things that seemed stable and strong are torn apart. What once seemed like rational thought turns into electrical misfires in the brain. The whole fabric of the city begins to unravel and everything is thrown into disarray.

And then, in the scenes that follow, Jesus continues to rattle and shake things up. First he goes to the temple and in a fury he overturns the moneychanger's tables, driving them out. And then, the next morning he came across a fig tree that wasn't bearing fruit, and he got angry and cursed it, causing it to wither up and die.

So what in the world is going on? When his followers are throwing a party and excitedly making plans for Jesus and his future as messiah, as warrior, as prophet and king; while his disciples and those he taught and healed and mentored and heavily influenced are getting ready for a great day of reckoning when God solves all of their problems and finally brings about peace and freedom, there is something else happening all around them, that they have no idea is going on.

God is rumbling the earth. Rattling the foundations of everything that exists. God is breaking stone-cold hearts to pieces. Closed-off minds are being shaken free. Those who have grown complacent; those who have gotten too comfortable; those who have turned their faith into an opportunity for personal gain; those who think they are growing and doing good but have in fact stopped bearing fruit; those who have stopped caring; those who have grown entrenched in their habits and traditions and as a result have tried to silence the spirit of God working in their midst – God is shaking and rattling people to their core; cracking open hard shells; unleashing the demons that had come to rest deeply in people's cavernous souls; bringing about what looks on the surface to be utter chaos – but it is really just the first steps to healing.

My kids and I watched Mary Poppins together this week, and there is a scene near the end of the movie after Mr. Banks loses his job at the bank. Everything that he has spent his whole life working for seems to be crashing down all around him. And he sings:

*My world was calm, well-ordered, exemplary.  
Then came this person with chaos in her wake.  
And now my life's ambitions go with one fell blow.  
It's quite a bitter pill to take.*

But that crashing – that thundering – that shaking up – that rattling – sometimes that is exactly what it takes to open our eyes and open our hearts. In the case of Mr. Banks, he had to lose everything to discover that the greatest gift of all – his children – were

standing right in front of him. And through their eyes he could rediscover the simple delight of flying a kite. He could learn, once again, to be happy and joyful. But only after he had been freed of the trappings that pulled him down.

And *that* is what Jesus is doing as he rides into Jerusalem. He's not there for a parade or a party. He's there to break things down so that they might be rebuilt. To bring chaos, so that God might open up the space for joy. To rattle people up; to shake them to their core – so that on the day of resurrection it would not just be Jesus raised to new life – it would be *all* God's children – primed and ready to receive the gift that God was offering.

So my friends, in this Mile 23 of the marathon of our journeys of faith – as we find ourselves weary, tired, done-in; as we find ourselves shaken up a bit; rattled out of our normal, everyday existence; as we find ourselves having to find new ways to do life, and community; having to re-set and re-configure our expectations about what should be; as old traditions take on new forms; as we are forced to re-evaluate what is really truly important – may we discover in the rattling, in the shaking, in the discomfort and the disquiet of this season a space of new opportunity for new growth. May our hearts be broken free of the entrapments that we had grown comfortable with. And out of the rubble, may we be set free to see with clear eyes the glory of the risen Lord.