

Triumph
Palm Sunday
April 9, 2017
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[Zechariah 9: 9-12](#)

[Matthew 21: 1-11](#)

[Philippians 2: 5-11](#)

The story of Palm Sunday is surely well known to you – it is, after all, the kickoff to Holy Week, the annual remembrance of the events leading to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus tells his disciples to get him a colt that seems to be waiting for them – then he rides the colt into Jerusalem while people wave their palm branches and shout, "Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest!" And the people love Jesus, because he's Jesus – and that's the story. Yup, we've heard this all before. Yet – if you're like me – there's some details here that stand out to you. Why a colt of a donkey? What does Hosanna mean? If the people are really happy to see him, why do they immediately ask who he is?

Let's dive right in: you may remember from our Hebrew Bible reading today that there was a prophesy in Zechariah that Jesus was fulfilling by riding on the colt of a donkey. Zechariah writes:

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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.

This passage was rapidly associated with the coming of the Messiah, and describes an unusually humble king, who commands peace to the nations. Broken bows and chariots, even war-horses will stand down. The donkey is simultaneously a humble beast of burden – explicitly, not a war-horse – and a symbol of Jewish Kings. You see, the great king of Israel, Solomon, was crowned after riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

And the crowds! Shouting out *hoshiana* – which means “Please save us!” or possibly, “Deliver us, now!” They’re crying out to be saved – though not in the way Christian jargon would have you think. This isn’t a call for eternal redemption, but a specific cry for deliverance from an oppressor – the Empire of Rome. The crowd spreads their cloaks before Jesus – which is what Jehu’s friends did when he was crowned king of Judah (2 Kings 9:13). They also cut down branches from the palm trees, laying them before Jesus’ feet, which is how Simon Maccabeus was greeted after a great victory against the Greek occupiers. Seeing anyone riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, especially to such a gathered crowd, would have been obvious as a prophesied moment. People asking “Who is this?” aren’t asking for a name – they want to hear, “The Messiah! The Messiah is here!”

For the people hearing this in Matthew’s community, there could only be one comparison: the Roman Triumph, the greatest honor a Roman citizen could receive. Matthew’s Gospel was likely written and first distributed sometime in the late 70s or early 80s CE. This means that the Great Judean Revolt had already been crushed – Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple torn down and looted, and the last of the zealots defeated by their own hand at the siege of the fortress of Masada. The result of all of this destruction was a Triumph for Titus Flavius, the Roman general who oversaw the destruction of Jerusalem and Masada – and the son of the new Roman Emperor, Caesar Vespasianus. Now, I’ve used the word Triumph a few times in this description – let me help you understand it a little better.

(clip from HBO’s Rome)

A Triumph in Ancient Rome was a grand parade, led from the field of Mars outside of Rome to the Senate, along the Triumphal Path. In the front of this great *pompa*, or procession, were all the spoils of war taken by the general in service to Rome. Works of art, gold and silver artifacts, prisoners and slaves, all were marched through the streets of Rome. Musicians would play flutes and drums, and dancers would dance lasciviously. In the case of Titus Flavius, his

Triumph was accompanied by the great Menorah from the Temple, along with many captive zealots, Sicarii, priests and Levites. Following the spoils of war was the general himself, riding in a chariot pulled by white war-horses. His face would be painted red, and he would wear a wreath made of laurel branches, representing the god Jupiter. Following the general would be all the legions of soldiers who returned from the battle, allowed the rare privilege of marching into Rome in full battle uniform. All through the parade, slaves would carry heavy sacks of gold and silver coins, throwing them into the crowds for the ordinary people. These coins were usually newly-minted, carrying an image of the general – or later, the Emperor – and an inscription highlighting what they had done. In the days of the Roman republic, a slave would ride with the general on the chariot, whispering to them throughout all the glory and parade that they were mortal, and not, in fact, a god. Later, the generals would often throw grand spectacles of sporting contests and games, even gladiator battles. If all of this sounds oddly familiar – think of the anthem the choir sang this morning. “God-like youth” “breathe the flutes” “let there be sport” – clearly, the anthem is bringing to mind the ancient Triumph!

This is a big deal – Triumphs were usually only given at the end of a long military and civil career. Families with ancestors who had received triumphs were considered noble, even if it had been generations since they had done anything notable. These noble families kept death masks – that is, impressions of the face taken after death – of their ancestors hanging on a wall in their villas, so they could be long remembered – it was a sort of immortality of memory.

So, when I say that Matthew’s community had that sort of a Triumph in mind – maybe some of them had even been captives in the triumph of Titus Flavius – how does that change how they would have heard the story of Jesus’ triumphal entry? Immediately, if you know the story well, it’s clear that it’s a total subversion of the Roman Triumph. Jesus is granted honor as one who was preaching peace through healing and love, not peace through fear. He arrived in true humility – as Paul puts it in the letter to the church in Philippi, “Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to

exploit, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and becoming like human beings.” Instead of showering the crowds with money, the crowds showered him with respect, putting their cloaks and palm branches before him.

Now we come to the meat of Palm Sunday. The palm branches weren't just a random addition, but were a great symbol of Jewish independence. While the Menorah represented Jewish religious independence, the symbol usually chosen for political independence was the palm branch or palm tree, dating from the Maccabees and the Hasmonean dynasty. Waving palm branches was like waving a “don't tread on me” flag during the American revolution – or like the Palestinian-flag patterned Keffya, worn to show solidarity with the people in occupied Palestine. It evoked a visceral, powerful reaction – and was so meaningful a symbol that it was stamped into Jewish coins as a symbol for the nation.

And later – it was stamped into Roman coins, with the words “Iudea Capta” – Judea Captured, or Conquered. The Romans knew of the importance of the symbol – and combined it with a weeping woman, while a centurion stands tall. Now, this is from the triumphal arch in Rome of Titus Flavius, showing the items from the temple in Jerusalem carried through the streets of Rome. When he became emperor, Titus Flavius melted down much of the gold and silver from the temple to fund the building of the coliseum. The great menorah, and other artifacts were placed in a newly-constructed and ironically named, “temple of peace.” But that's not the end of their story – after being seized by the Vandals, they would be recovered in the era of Justinian I, who through a Christianized Triumph of his own for his general, Belisarius - and paraded the artifacts through the streets of Constantinople. Yet, today, they have been lost again – never returned to the Jewish people.

When we wave palm branches and remember the events of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, at the beginning of that Holy Week, we remember the nationalist pride and desire for a “Mighty Messiah”. But that's not the Messiah that God sent – not a warrior, but a maker of peace. Not one who held himself up

as a god, above all the earth – but true divinity, who was humble enough to be human. Humble enough to die a criminal’s death on a cross, for crimes he didn’t commit. And so, Holy Week begins at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and it certainly doesn’t end there. Jesus goes into the temple, and throws out the money changers. He spends most of his time on the streets with the people, tells the disciples to prepare a room for Passover, where they have their last supper. Judas betrays him to his enemies, Jesus is condemned, tortured, crucified, dies, and is buried. He rises from the dead on Easter and continues his ministry until the ascension. This pattern – of high point, to low point, and back to high point – is our path this week. From Palm Sunday, to Passover, to Maundy Thursday, to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we too will follow Christ. Today, we celebrate Jesus Christ’s nonviolent triumph, peaceful entry, and subversion of the Powers and Principalities of Empire. Jesus paid the price for this subversion

May you be strong in your faith, working with God for the cause of peace in the world. May the Spirit fill you with energy as you celebrate Christ’s Triumph – and may Jesus hold you tightly as you remember his death this Holy Week. Amen!