



PALM SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 24, 2013

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Lection – Matthew 21:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, (v. 2) saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. (v. 3) If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” (v. 4) This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, (v. 5) “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.” (v. 6) The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; (v. 7) they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. (v. 8) A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. (v. 9) The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (v. 10) When he entered

Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” (v. 11) The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Palm Sunday occurs one week prior to Easter Sunday, marking the beginning of Holy Week (the final week of Lent). It is the celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As Jesus rode on the back of a donkey, the people burst into praise of God and lined the streets with palm branches. The New Testament writers saw this event as the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9— “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.”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 21:1-11

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

For years, Palm Sunday was an occasion for unbridled celebration. In the background was always the 20/20 hindsight of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Therefore, I had none of the first-century hopes for a military ruler or the overthrow of an oppressive government. I knew the end of the story. I was celebrating a *fait accompli*, an accomplished act—the saving of my soul through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

However, as I now approach Matthew’s Gospel, I strive to stand in the shoes of the original worshippers, in a time and place in which I may have hopes for how I would like the story to end but do not yet know the ending. I ask myself one question: How can I get my “Palm Sunday” praise to make it through Good Friday? In other words, I don’t want a praise that is merely dependent on a crowd or a feeling like things are finally going my way or a belief that God is going to do exactly what I want, when I want it, how I want it, only to change my tune or downgrade my estimation of God when things do not go my way. I want to praise God, trust God even when I do not understand God or like how God decided to handle some things in my life.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Verse 1: The passage opens with Jesus and his disciples nearing Jerusalem. The historical location of Bethphage is unknown. However, by pairing Bethphage with the Mount of Olives, Matthew is reinforcing the idea that Jesus is quickly approaching Jerusalem—the site of his suffering, death, and resurrection (Mt. 16:21).

Verses 2-3: Jesus sends two disciples with a very specific set of instructions. As they enter the village, they will find a donkey and her colt. They are to loose them and bring them to Jesus. Should anyone question them, they are to give the following response: “The Lord has need of them.” Matthew’s account differs from the other Gospels in two ways, which is worth our consideration. First, unlike the other three Gospels, Matthew notes the use of two animals—a donkey and her colt. The owner is asked to release both. Second, unlike Mark’s Gospel in which the disciples are told to promise the return of the animal, Matthew only chronicles the Lord’s

need of the animals. The owner's contribution to the events that will soon take place must be given in faith. He has no knowledge of what is about to take place nor any promise of wealth, blessing, or even the return of what was given. However, the fact that Jesus needs the animals, will be enough: "immediately he will send them." The Palm Sunday parade will be possible because Jesus' word was good enough for the disciples to go (v. 6) and good enough for the owner to give (v. 7).

Verses 4-5: According to Matthew, all of these happenings are the fulfillment of prophecy, specifically Zechariah 9:9. However, Matthew reinforces the trustworthiness of Jesus by showing prophecy-fulfillment on two levels. First, within the context of the Gospel, Matthew shows us that Jesus' word is as reliable as Old Testament Scripture. He speaks and things are as he has spoken. The reader of the Gospel should take his predictions of his suffering, death, and resurrection with the same surety as they take his words about the donkey and the colt. Second, Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Mt. 5:17). All that is taking place is neither random or happenstance. It was predicted long ago.

Verses 6-7: The disciples return to Jesus having completed their assignment. They bring back the donkey and colt, having found them just as Jesus said. Using their cloaks as makeshift saddles, the disciples drape the animals' backs and Jesus mounts them.

Verse 8-9: The scope of the story widens. Previously, Matthew focuses his narrative lens on Jesus, the two disciples, the animals, and their owner. Now we are told of the presence of a large crowd. Matthew uses the Greek phrase *pleistos ochlos* to describe the crowd only here, suggesting that this is the largest crowd to have gathered. It so large that they are both behind and in front of Jesus. Without any provocation, announcement, or appeal, the crowd begins to mimic the actions of the disciples. They too spread their cloaks on the road. Some begin to cut tree branches to line the road. Their shouts reveal the reason for their participation.

The crowd cries out, "Hosanna!" This could either be rendered as a petition: "Save now" or more likely, a simple cry of praise.¹ Once again, "Son of David" is used to identify Jesus (Mt. 12:23; 15:22; 20:31). The shouts of praise are rife with messianic import. "Son of David" connects Jesus to the king who unified the twelve tribes under one monarchy, subdued Israel's enemies thereby giving them rest, and made Jerusalem his capital city. Moreover, Israel experienced its greatest season of prosperity under David and his son, Solomon. It is clear that as Jesus enters Jerusalem, those same expectations frame the crowd's praise. Israel now desires deliverance from the Romans and the restoration of former glory. Just as Zechariah 9:9 is fulfilled through Jesus' actions, it seems that the crowd expects the fulfillment of God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

The praise continues. Quoting Psalm 118:26, they shout, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Jesus is no independent operative. He is God-sent. By acknowledging that he comes "in the name of the Lord," the crowd asserts that his actions are in line with God's will. Jesus is God's agent, working what God wants on earth.

The final “Hosanna” extends to the “highest heaven.” Heaven is the realm of God. Therefore, it is best interpreted as “an enthusiastic cry and probably means that Jesus is to be praised everywhere, right up to heaven itself.”²

Verses 10-11: By the time Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, the city is in turmoil. Matthew uses the verbal form of the word “earthquake” (*seio*) to describe the shaking that Jesus’ entrance causes. Everyone wants to know the identity of the one the crowd is shouting about. “Who is this?” they ask, reminiscent of Jesus’ question to the disciples in Matthew 16:13, Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Yet surprisingly, the crowd’s answer betrays none of the Messianic overtones voiced in their praise or spiritual insight of Peter. Their response: “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.”

Challenge

The challenge of the text is to stick to the song voiced in verse 9. Do not change the tune or downgrade the melody with lesser lyrics. In verse 9, the crowd identifies Jesus as more than a prophet but the long-awaited Messiah. He is “son of David” and the one who does what God bids. He is the fulfillment of prophecy, trustworthy and true. He speaks the truth; he acts according to the truth and accomplishes God’s divine purposes, purposes that we do not always understand. There is no need to change the words (cf. 21:11). One commentator put it this way: “For a short time, the people would acknowledge Jesus’ true identity as the sovereign Son of David, but they would fail to identify him also as the sacrificial Son of Abraham. They knew he had come to restore his kingdom, but they missed the fact that he was also here to redeem his people. They anticipated the sovereignty but overlooked the sacrifice. Jesus would not exercise the rule without the redemption.”³ And so they changed their testimony—they downgraded Jesus from promised Messiah to prophet. However, if we stick to the song in verse 9, we will be reminded of the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God. So that even when Good Fridays come, when things do not go the way we expect or imagine, we can trust God to still resurrect dead things and give new life. Just look at Jesus!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: the voice of Jesus (vv. 2-3); the neighing of the donkey and her colt (vv. 6-7); the clomping of hooves on Palestinian roads; tree branches breaking (v. 8); the padded sound of hooves on cloaks and branches (v. 8); shouts of praise (v. 9); bustling crowds, confusion, questions of people in Jerusalem (v. 10);

Sights: Jerusalem in the distance, the heights of Mount Olives, figs of Bethphage (v. 1); donkey and colt tied like Jesus said (vv. 6-7); a multitude of people lining the road, cloaks of all colors and fabrics, in various conditions, people climbing trees to cut branches (v. 8); people shouting, straining to see Jesus pass by, arms waving, jostling and bumping each other (v. 9); confused and questioning faces, crowded streets (v.10);

Smells: Scent of animals, of people close up on one another; the fragrance of tree leaves; musky cloaks; dust rising from the roads.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

Hymns that can be used:

- Tell Me the Stories of Jesus
- Hosanna, Loud Hosanna
- All Glory, Laud, and Honor

Songs that can be used:

- Oh, Magnify the Lord
- Hosanna by Kirk Franklin
- O Worship the King by Chris Tomlin

Quotation

But everyone who lined the streets had a different reason for waving those palms. Some were political activists; they'd heard Jesus had supernatural power, and they wanted him to use it to free Israel from Roman rule. Others had loved ones who were sick or dying. They waved branches, hoping for physical healing. Some were onlookers merely looking for something to do, while others were genuine followers who wished Jesus would establish himself as an earthly king. Jesus was the only one in the parade who knew why he was going to Jerusalem—to die. He had a mission, while everyone else had an agenda.

—Bill Hybels, Willow Creek Community Church

Notes

1. Blomberg, C. Vol. 22: Matthew. The New American Commentary (313). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992.
2. Morris, L. The Gospel According to Matthew. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (523). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992.
3. Weber, S. K. Vol. 1: Matthew. Holman New Testament Commentary (338–339). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000.